

Many Waters

Elinor Chipp



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MANY WATERS

ELINOR CHIPP

MANY WATERS

BY

ELINOR CHIPP

AUTHOR OF "DOUBTING CASTLE," ETC.



*Many waters cannot quench love, neither
can the floods drown it.—SONG OF SOLOMON.*



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TO
THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER

PART ONE

MANY WATERS

CHAPTER

I

BY the edge of a small irregular pond down in the hollow and hidden from the house by a line of flowering shrubs, a small boy was actively engaged in the quasi-torture of a very tiny grey kitten.

Both the boy and the kitten were intensely serious—the kitten, owing to its uncomfortable position, the boy, with the frowning preoccupation of the investigator.

The situation admits of possibilities; variations are interesting, piquant, mirth-provoking, according as one indulges one's fancy. In the new-found strength of youth there is a range of opportunities quite delightful: one develops originality, one experiments, one is a scientist, a latent gift for invention shows itself. One is, moreover, all-conquering.

In the present instance the small boy (he was not really so very small, being twelve and a half and already remarkably fine looking for his age) had acquired a method at once delicate and profound. It consisted in throwing the tiny ball of grey fluff as far out into the pond as possible, and then, with mingled delight and admiration, watching its slow and perilous struggle back to shore.

As it reached the region of comparative safety repre-

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sented by the green line of the banks, the boy, eagerly waiting, pounced upon it to send it hurtling once more out into the centre of the pond. The kitten, rapidly growing more and more exhausted in its hopeless struggle against the overwhelming odds, began to show signs of collapse; its efforts were ludicrous, pitiable, droll, yet the boy's interest did not flag.

"Seven," counted the boy truculently as he once again caught the miserable, dripping little creature. He had all but missed him this time, due to a last despairing dodge of his victim, for the boy, having inherently the instincts of a sportsman, now allowed a second's grace at the edge of the bank—useless as far as the kitten was concerned, too exhausted to profit thereby.

"Seven," the boy repeated in a low whisper; and held the half-drowned, wretched little animal to his breast a moment in order to get a better hold on its fur.

His face was serious, and, in spite of his occupation, in no way evil-looking. It was, in fact, save for the frowning brows which the gravity of the business in hand involved, rather affable than otherwise. Tall for his age, lithe, fair-haired, with a few faint freckles across the bridge of his straight little nose, full, well-formed lips and a beautifully modelled chin, he was altogether a pleasing figure of a boy. Attired in a nondescript costume of knee-length socks, brown corduroy breeches dulled a soft grey from hard wear and showing a rent near the left knee, a soft shirt of unusually fine material, open at the neck to show a throat straight and slim and wonderfully moulded, made up a figure altogether charming to unprejudiced eyes. On the bank beside him lay a discarded tan sweater. Such was Donald Callender, only son of Colonel and Mrs. Callender of Whitridge.

Gripping the kitten firmly by a handful of fur at the

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back of its neck, he drew himself back, body poised like a javelin thrower's, slender, graceful, a statue carved out of mobile living flesh, and let go. At the same instant, from behind him, there came a sharp scream, stabbing the silence about him and somewhat spoiling his throw. The kitten went only half as far as intended.

He turned. A small girl, white-faced with rage, was running towards him from the cluster of elms that hid the pond from the road beyond, her hands clenched in anger, her lower lip caught fiercely between small white teeth in a ferocious effort to keep back the tears. Behind her pelted a boy, smaller than the one on the bank, stockier, less agile, white-ribboned tie flying behind him as he ran, heavy boots thud-thudding on the soft grass.

The boy on the bank turned back to the pond just in time to seize again the unfortunate kitten as he emerged. He turned, laughing, to the others, showing a row of charmingly white teeth. The smile lighted up his face wonderfully, dispelling the frown, making him wholly boyish and lovable.

"I say, you jolly near made me miss him that time."

The newcomers had reached the bank now. They stood side by side, an even height, the boy's face red with running; the little girl, still pale as ivory, was shaking with emotion.

"You wicked boy! Oh, you wicked boy!" was all she could gasp out. The boy beside her stood silent, breathing hard, hands tight-clenched.

In the silence which followed the little girl's outburst, Donald glanced down at the wet and dripping kitten in his arms and a look of faint surprise overspread his features. It had amused him to watch its struggles in the water; the moral attributes of the case had not affected him.

Now the other boy spoke. "You beast!" he declared,

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seconding the little girl. "You filthy beast! That isn't your kitten."

The tall boy looked at him coolly but without any sign of annoyance.

"Well, it isn't yours, either."

Refuted, the smaller boy hesitated, anger struggling with a primitive sense of the rights of property. In the deadlock thus achieved the little girl stepped forward. What a time to fuss and mull with logic, or the question of possession! She pointed a small accusing finger at the strange grey kitten, still wet and cowering against the fair boy's breast.

"Don't you dare throw it in again," she lisped. She only did this lisping when excited. It was a habit which particularly annoyed her but which she was to carry with her all through life. "Don't you dare!" she repeated. "If you do, Mark will beat you. Won't you, Mark?"

She turned to the boy at her side who, shouldered with a sudden responsibility, tried nobly to meet it.

"Ye-es, rather!" he agreed doubtfully.

Donald Callender shook the fair hair back from his forehead. He looked from one to the other of his critics; scowled for a moment in perplexity; then his brow cleared.

"I'm not going to throw it in again. Here, take your old cat." He tumbled it, dishevelled and dripping, into the eager arms of the little girl who had begun to cry softly. "You're a pair of young kids, you are. I'm going into the house to get something to eat."

He strolled off, hands negligently thrust into his pockets, whistling a tune. His whistling was very inexact.

His capitulation was not due to any fear of the little girl's threat, nor did he resent the implied insult to his own pugilistic prowess. Under other circumstances he would have fought Mark Wetherell gladly and joyously.

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Nor was it that he was in truth tired of watching the struggles and antics of the half-drowned kitten. It was simply that he had been brought to see the point of view of another. He didn't care one way or another about the kitten; but he respected the others' strength of feeling in the matter. It was significant, this characteristic of his, this mobility of viewpoint, and was destined to influence him all through life, to smooth the way for him, to bring him friends and to make him the universally admired man into whom he was later to develop. Carelessly he would whistle his serene way through ranks upon ranks of less fortunately equipped individuals who had not his own happy faculty of acquiescence. As he once, many years later, remarked to that same Mark Wetherell: "The world belongs to those who can best adjust themselves to it. That's the true secret of the art of living; but most people don't know it."

In the present case he had but adjusted himself to the conventions of a more humane society than himself, and he remained quite comfortable. Admitting his own premise, and carrying it still further, one might say that the kitten had failed to adjust itself to circumstances—hence its discomfiture— But we grow diffuse—

Left alone on the green bank of the pond, the two children watched their playmate's departure in silence. Then the little girl, still sobbing, sank down on the grass and began gently to dry the kitten with the skirt of her brown gingham frock. The kitten, after drawing its claws in one ungrateful scratch across the little girl's bare right arm, settled down in her lap with a contented shiver.

Occupied, the girl—Marian Pritchard was her name—paid no more heed to the departing Donald; but the boy, Mark Wetherell, continued to gaze after him. A thoughtful frown of regret was deepening on his forehead.

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"It's no use trying to fight him," he said, "he won't fight."

Marian looked up for an instant from her ministrations.

"Why not? Is he afraid?"

Mark shook his head.

"No," he said truthfully, "he isn't afraid. It isn't that. He could lick me easy," a painful honesty flushed his cheeks, "and he knows it. That's why he wouldn't fight. It—it was I who was afraid." The colour deepened on his cheeks and he dropped his eyes.

"No, you weren't," the little girl flashed back at him. "You weren't at all afraid! You weren't! Anyway, you would have fought him if he'd been willing to and that shows you're braver, or, at least, just as brave as he is."

"But—but I couldn't really have made him give up the cat," persisted the boy with honesty. "Not if he'd really meant to keep it, and—and if he'd landed me one."

"He couldn't have hit you," the little girl reminded him with satisfaction, "without dropping the cat. And then I should have grabbed it and run. So you see we should have won after all."

"That's true." Mark brightened. "But I'm glad I didn't have to, all the same. It was beastly for the kitten, of course, but I like Donald. I think he's wonderful," he added in a blushing admission.

A voice from the shrubbery near them cut short the other child's response.

"Master Mark, will you come in and have some tea with Mrs. Callender and Master Donald? They're waiting for you now up at the house. Mrs. Callender sent me down to fetch you. She telephoned the rectory and they said you might stay. You're to come at once, please."

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Mark turned, and the little girl looked up; then slowly rose to her feet, lifting the kitten in her arms.

The hard, rather pinched features, of the Callenders' housemaid confronted them above her crisp black dress and stiffly starched apron. Her eyes were small and greedy like the eyes of a rodent. Mark glanced reflectively from her to the child beside him. Reading his unspoken thought the maid hastily spoke:

"At once, please, Master Mark! Tea's already on the table. Mrs. Callender said nothing about the little girl. She can run along now, I expect. I'm sure she's been around here long enough, haven't you, child? Do come, now. Master Donald is waiting." She compressed her lips formidably.

Oppressed with the superiority of age and the air of command, Mark yielded and joined the woman. Marian, with the kitten in her arms, stood staring after them. The hard-faced maid waved an admonitory hand at her from a distance.

"There now, run along, do!—We wants none of the likes of you about," she added under her breath.

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The child, left alone, silently watched them out of sight around the screen of shrubbery. Then, very slowly, she turned, and slipping dexterously through a gap in the hedge, made her way along the edge of the park, emerging onto the main road at some little distance from the pond. Cutting across this road at right angles she climbed a low stone wall into an unused meadow, whence a field path led her presently to a bridge across a narrow stream beyond which rose the vine-covered walls of the modest cottage which was her home, and beyond them the stables, more extensive by far than the house.

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She paused on the bridge for a moment to watch the black angular flies skating on the surface of the water and the thin waving grasses stirred by some invisible current underneath.

Still unhurriedly she opened and passed through the little wicket gate which separated the cottage garden from the outer world, walked up the neat gravelled path to the house, and, avoiding the front door with its columns of twining roses, followed the meandering gravel bordered with sweet alyssum, around to the side of the house. Here, selecting a warm corner of the porch where the sun struck full, she deposited the kitten, which, warmed and dried, tucked its paws contentedly beneath its body and, quite satisfied, went to sleep.

With a little sigh, perhaps at the lack of attachment apparent in the cat, Marian left it. The porch door, opening directly into the dining room was, as usual, unlatched. She entered and closed the door methodically after her.

The room was rather dark, for the blinds on the side towards the sun had been pulled down. Marian blinked for a moment in the uncertain light after the brilliant out-of-doors. It was cool here, but oppressive, as if the room lacked airing.

Her mother was standing at the sideboard hastily partaking of a belated luncheon of sardine sandwiches and ginger beer. Her eyes turned towards the little girl as she entered, but otherwise she took no cognizance of her presence. She was busy pouring out the frothy ginger beer.

Marian looked at her mother. She was dressed, as usual, in her riding habit, the skirt wrapped about her rather gaunt form. She had not troubled to hook the skirt into place, but held it there with the tip of her elbow.

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She had taken off her hat, and her hair, knotted in a tight braid at the nape of her neck and tied with a black ribbon, gave, without the hat, a foolishly juvenile look to her head. Her hands, long and slim, grasped the sandwich.

Marian regarded her mother studiously, gravely. It was rather as if she had never seen her before.

Mrs. Pritchard turned back to the sideboard to pour herself another glass of the ginger beer; and Marian observed the sharp line of her profile against the window blind; the hawklike nose, high-bridged, aristocratic; the expressive, deep-set black eyes, above the thin line of lips and the teeth that stuck out ever so little.

Elaine Pritchard took a deep draught of the ginger beer and finished off the last sandwich. "Gad! but I'm tired," she announced abruptly. "I've half a mind not to go out again, so long as it's not necessary. It's no joke trying to teach stupid children to ride all day." The remains of the ginger beer followed the sandwich. "Awkward little pigs!" she added.

Marian said nothing. She knew it was hard work being a riding teacher and giving riding lessons all day. She had heard it pronounced so very often. So she said nothing and seated herself on the arm of one of the dining-room chairs. She felt dispirited, unhappy; a sense of the futility of life suddenly overwhelmed her. It is a feeling which youth has no business to know. Vaguely, the mother sensed a lack of energy in the child, observed the dim traces of tears about her eyes.

"Where've you been?" she asked sharply.

"Playing." The child turned away, instinctively hiding her hurt.

"Who with?"

Marian sighed. She always hated these cross-examinations which ended in nothing. She was strangely sensi-

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tive, craving a little tenderness—understanding. In spite of herself the tears came back into her eyes. The woman at the sideboard noticed them and for a moment her own eyes softened.

“What’s the matter?” she asked brusquely. “Has any one been saying anything to you?”

The child shook her head. She could not trust herself to speak just then. If only her mother would take her in her arms for a moment, hold her close as she had seen Mark’s mother hold him— But that, of course, was absurd!

Mrs. Pritchard looked down at her gloves and crop which she had started to gather up from the bare table. There was something slightly confused about her manner. It may have been that she guessed the child’s need and felt herself inadequate to deal with it. Perhaps she, too, longed for a closer *rapprochement*, a meeting on some more emotional terms; but the years and her own temperament had placed a barrier between them which she could not bridge. Time had but confirmed her in the conviction that she had given all that was in her of love and affection to one person in the world. As water will sometimes concentrate in one deep, unfathomable well, leaving the surrounding land dry and striated, so her emotional life had flowed into one channel. In her absorption she had neglected or refused to acknowledge the existence of other ties. As impossible for her to take this child of hers to her heart as to change her stature; and yet she was not a bad mother.

Possibly the ache of thwarted motherhood tried her as severely as the apparent lack of affection tried the child. At all events, sensing a difficult situation, she avoided Marian’s eyes and repeated her question:

“Who have you been playing with?”

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"Mark and Donald," Marian answered over her shoulder from the shadow of the window seat whither she had retired.

Elaine got rid of the uncomfortable sense of having failed the child by assuming a responsibility in regard to her playmates.

"I'd rather you played with Donald than with Mark. It will mean more for you later on—socially, I mean." It did not occur to her that Marian could not follow this line of reasoning. Elaine Pritchard always talked to her that way—as if the child were grown up. She had no proper understanding of what childhood means. "They didn't think to ask you in to tea, I suppose."

Marian shook her head. Instinctively again she hid the true account.

Elaine slipped the napkin she had not used back into the drawer of the sideboard and picked up her hat from the chair where it lay.

"Oh, they wouldn't think of it, of course. People never do any of the nice things they might. I was in hopes you might have got a bite to eat up there. It would have helped out a lot to-day. I've finished up everything here."

"It doesn't matter."

The child sat in the window seat, her chin cupped in her hand, gazing out through the half-closed shutters where the blind had been raised a little. Elaine stood looking perplexedly at the empty ginger beer bottle.

"I couldn't get home at lunchtime—too busy. And Ted had his lunch at Jerrold's in the village. You didn't have any, I suppose?"

The child shook her head.

"I'm sorry. What a nuisance they didn't invite you in to have something up at the Hall. However, there's some cold chicken in the ice chest." Her brow cleared. "You

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might get yourself some of that if you're hungry. I've got to go out now. I've promised Ted to be ready by half-past; it's that now, and I've got to brush up my hair a bit. Just find yourself something out in the kitchen, won't you? That's a good girl. And you might carry those dishes out for me, if you will. If you see Ted, tell him I'll be with him in a jiffy—" She disappeared through the dining-room door.

Left alone, the child drew her feet up on to the window seat. Somewhat hungry when she came in, her appetite seemed to have gone suddenly. She would have liked a little luncheon if her mother had had time to sit down with her while she ate it, but she didn't want anything alone. It wasn't that kind of hunger.

She ran the blind up a little further and knelt on the hard cushions, feeling, somehow, very small and neglected, and gazed out into the sunshine of the little cottage garden. From her place she could just see the kitten's grey head sleepily curled on its forepaws, but even that sight failed to rouse her. She wondered dispassionately what would ultimately become of the little thing. She wouldn't be allowed to keep it, of course. It wouldn't do on account of the dogs. And after all she was fond of the dogs. She must go out presently and make sure that they were locked up in the stable yard where they wouldn't find the kitten. And perhaps Mrs. Jerrold in the village would take the cat for her. They had recently lost their old tortoise shell she knew—and Mrs. Jerrold was so kind-hearted. Or there was old Mr. Horner who might need one—

There was Ted Chamberlayne in the drive outside, standing at the heads of the two horses. She thought of opening the window and calling to him that her mother would be down directly, but the window wouldn't open easily and so she gave it up. What was the use to say

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her mother would be right there when she *would* be right there! Her mother had said she'd be down in a jiffy; and Ted never seemed to mind waiting.

Besides, she didn't feel like talking with Ted to-day. Not that he ever said much; but she dreaded, with the acute self-conscious dread of childhood, being questioned again about that missed tea up at the Hall. And she felt tired—tired of everything, of the dogs and the horses and the eternal stable talk—even tired of handsome Ted Chamberlayne; tired of his good looks, his broad hat and his interminable leggings and riding togs. Why didn't he ever wear other clothes? Her mother, now, occasionally slipped into an evening dress, relic of other days, or went shopping in town clad in a street frock and hat like other people, but Ted never! Always the same putties, grey hunting breeches, homespun coat and wide hat! She even knew the insides of his pockets: the fat, gold hunting-case watch that his father had given him and the little cross he carried, tucked away inside his vest pocket, that he had won in the South African War. It used to thrill her, that cross, but to-day she didn't care about that either. For it had come to her, in the faintest of suspicions, and with a meaning which she couldn't in the least comprehend, that in some inscrutable way Ted Chamberlayne was responsible for her not being wanted up at "the Hall," that being the somewhat pretentious name they gave to Donald's house on the hill.

Ted turned towards the house with a look of enquiry, and Marian waved tentatively, but he evidently couldn't see her through the closed window. After all, she was fond of Ted. She started up to go around by the door and deliver her message; but at that moment Elaine Pritchard ran down the stairs and out of the house by the front entrance, slamming the door behind her. Her eyes

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had the peculiar light which she kept for Ted alone, as he turned towards her and helped her to mount.

In another moment he was on his own horse and trotting beside her down the drive. Marian watched them out of sight. Her mother did not look back, but Marian could hear her high-pitched voice remonstrating with Ted over some question of the horses all the way out to the main road.

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Marian carried the soiled sandwich plate and beer bottle out into the kitchen. She made certain that the dogs, Pompey, Tags and Beppo, were safe in the stable yard; and then retired to her own little room upstairs—a cool little room with a dormer window facing the front garden, filled with the scent of roses and often with the sound of the surf beating on Hodder's beach, a hard, flat, sandy stretch of shore of some length; for the cottage stands midway between Whitridge village and the Hall, and Whitridge itself, that neat little New England village, is less than a mile from the sea.

The road which runs past the lower gate of the Hall grounds—not the road that passes the cottage—leads in a direct line to Thornton, a town of some size and the county seat. It is, in fact, a thriving little city of which Whitridge sometimes pretentiously claims to be a suburb.

Beyond Whitridge in the other direction, the road runs down close to the sea in irregular windings past high, undulating sand dunes covered with coarse grass, past the salt marshes and the low headland with its surmounting life-saving station and a few surrounding cottages, on, in a wide curve, to the clustered houses that form the village of Tonomet—considerably smaller and quainter than its companion village of Whitridge. It is a sleepy, unambi-

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tious little place, full at all times of elderly fishermen and retired sea dogs who sit about on the rotted old wharves and tell each other sea tales of a past day—tales as racy and hearty as themselves in their prime.

Boats go out from Tonomet still, but they are poor things compared with those of the old days; for Tonomet has lost much of its ancient grandeur. Yet there lingers about it still the flavour of romance, a mixed flavour of salt fish and the “beauty and mystery of ships,” of high adventure and the unforgotten toll of the sea, which Whitridge, in its comparative newness, lacks and, characteristically, mocks at. For Whitridge thinks rather well of itself and of little Tonomet—that village with the heathenish name, as Mrs. Jerrold of the “Eagle,” in Whitridge, will often speak of it, with, at best, an amused tolerance. It knows its superiority; for is it not just that much nearer to Thornton and therefore to the advantages of a city?

Thus all the older children of Whitridge go in daily to the Thornton High School, in large busses run at suitable hours for that purpose, whereas the children of Tonomet must do the best they can with the educational offerings of old Mr. Horner of Whitridge; the only alternative being the arrival by private conveyance, and at an outrageous hour, to meet the Whitridge bus—a feat remarkably few of the Tonomet children have ever been known to accomplish. There are, of course, innumerable other advantages in being a Whitridgeite. Indeed, it should be well understood that the reader’s sympathy and interest are expected to centre in that village, even though we allow the occasional picturesqueness of Tonomet.

But let us get back to Marian, whom we left in her little upper room at the cottage.

She had stopped in the sitting-room on her way to gather

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up her two favourite books. She had read neither of them, but she chose them for their pictures, with which she connected some story of her own originating. One was *The Vicar of Wakefield*; the other, which she now opened, was *Dombey and Son*, one of an old drab-covered edition with illustrations by "Phiz"; the picture which particularly fascinated her being the one of Florence and Edith Dombey on the staircase. The dark, tragic beauty of the runaway wife thrilled her; the ringlets; the hands that held off the other's impetuous advance; the great handsome staircase with wide, flat treads leading up to the half-glimpsed beauty of rooms above; all these things had never failed to awaken her imagination. Her interest in, and love for it dated back to the days before she and her mother had come to live in Whitridge, to the time when they lived at home with her father and Aunt Julia, when she herself was a tiny tot.

She tried to-day once more to plan a story to suit the picture. They used to amuse her—these exercises in imagination; but now the spell seemed to have been broken. She could get little pleasure out of them. She closed the book at last impatiently.

She tried getting out her dolls and setting them all in a row along the wall below the dormer window, but the joy of these was gone, too. She was getting old for dolls. And on a sudden impulse she determined to put them all away, to pack them up and send them out of her life—forever.

It was a wrench; it took courage. "It's for good," she told herself as she kissed them good-bye, one by one. The farewells made her very sad. The sun had almost set by the time she had finished.

She went to the window and stood looking out at the drooping garden. The dolls were all packed away now.

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Was it this that made her so unhappy? Or the remembrance of Donald's treatment of the grey kitten and of Mark's defection? Undoubtedly her idols were falling.

She was very pensive for a long time. Then she heard the voices of her mother and Ted Chamberlayne riding back up the drive in the deepening shadows.

Marian brushed away the threatening teardrops; with a quick, defiant tilt of her firm little chin—as firm and finely moulded as Ted Chamberlayne's own—she turned from the window and slowly went down the stairs to meet them.

CHAPTER II

I

THE betrayal of bedroom confidences is always out of order. The repetition of such intimate conversations by the omniscient author, whether driven thereto by indigence, the pertinacity of creditors or the obvious needs of the story, can never be regarded as in anything but the worst possible taste. It is a thing revolting in itself, despicable, unmanly—the poking of inquisitive noses into private apartments under the guise and semblance of literary curiosity, of intellectual research—Pah! the thing is too palpable, too crude—on the face of it a trumpery excuse not worthy the reader's credence!

Yet since your humble servant (whose want of craft tries him as much as yourself), since, I say, he knows no more dignified method of putting certain situations succinctly before you in order to tell his miserable tale, we must crave a thousand pardons. Let us to it, then, that it may be the sooner over and the bad odour of our indiscretions linger no longer than is necessary in the nostrils of our more fastidious readers.

Picture to yourself, then, the handsome house of Colonel Peter Callender, known as "The Hall," handsomest in the village or out of it, handsomer even than the houses in Thornton, standing alone on its spacious hill some two miles removed from the village proper; with a splendid sweep of drive—stone gate-posted, maple-lined and gravelled up to its impressive front door, with stables and all

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the appurtenances thereto sloping away again down the hill at the rear.

Picture to yourself a room in this house, on the second floor, not the largest, but by all odds the most attractive room in this most splendid of houses—Mrs. Callender's own sitting-room, or—as she prefers to call it, and vainly endeavours to persuade others to speak of it—her boudoir.

Naturally it is all that such a room should be. There is a dressing table (a French importation) of marquetry inlaid with mother-of-pearl. There is a divan such as a princess might use, deep and soft, heaped with rose-coloured cushions. There is a large rug covering the entire floor, soft grey in colour, to match the walls which are panelled in the same tint.

And on the walls there are pictures. Not just pictures such as you and I know them—a reproduction of Gainsborough's "Blue Boy," for instance, or mayhap, if your taste is a bit Victorian (conservatively so—I speak in no derogatory sense), a Watts' "Hope" sitting quite despondent atop her barren world—done in sepia and neatly framed in mahogany to match the tone of the paper—or even, if you happen to be somewhat more prosperous, a modern painting or two by some deserving, though as yet uncelebrated, artist. No, I repeat, not pictures such as you and I know them, not pictures as decorations for walls, but Pictures with a big P, and a big, a very big, price attached, as poor Colonel Callender's cheque book would show.

Over there on the left wall, for instance, there is a very small Whistler which must have stood him in for a pretty penny. It represents a lady clad in filmy white and bending very far back—almost dangerously far back—against a background of spurting fireworks; very eccentric—indeed, the lady appears to be in some peril—never-

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theless, as its owner would point out to you, there is apparent the Whistler touch, and, in full sight, the Whistler butterfly.

Downstairs, of course, in the great double drawing-rooms there are more treasures; but only two or three here. So much the better; there speaks the good taste of their owner! And no one could deny Clara Callender the compliment of having taste. It was her supreme virtue, the aim and ideal which she had set before herself from her youth onward.

In the furnishing and adornment of the room in question it was shown to a degree. In only one detail had she lapsed; that was in the matter of photographs. On the mantelpiece a large framed photograph of Colonel Callender in uniform; on the lacquer table by the window another (equally large) of Major Robinson, Mrs. Callender's father—an elderly gentleman with a severe yet aristocratic countenance (its companion picture, a too exact likeness of his late wife, simply had to be banished some six years ago when the widowed Major died); and no less than twelve representations of her son Donald, at ages ranging from a rather dim photograph taken at six weeks, tucked away on a corner of the dressing table, to an enlarged kodak snapshot of a few weeks back; and exclusive of the charmingly painted miniature, done when the boy was nine, which makes him out a blond angel. Indeed, the artist all but painted a halo over the devotionally raised head. It occupies the place of honour on the side wall just under the Whistler.

The boudoir, with its soft rose-and-grey colourings should have harboured only peace. The very words rose and grey suggest it. Nevertheless, on this occasion, it did not. Peace had hidden her head and spread her wings and departed hurriedly some moments before; and rancour

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reigned in her stead. The soft grey rug was being given a sort of rapid and unaccustomed massage by the great shuffling feet of the big Colonel himself, as he stamped energetically up and down the length of the room; the smooth, grey-panelled walls echoed with the clarion trumpet of his wrath voiced in choleric protest. Yes, Colonel Peter Callender himself is speaking when we (very indiscreetly) come upon them. His wife, the visual counterpart of an early Christian martyr enduring torture, is sitting at her dressing table, hands tight clasped in her lap, white teeth biting her thin pale lips, as, in his thundering passage to and fro, the Colonel pauses, from time to time, to throw her the forceful expression of his disapproval:

"And I tell you she shall be allowed to come! And as often as she likes. And asked, too. I'll have none of this nonsense around my place. She's a nice child. As nice a little girl as I've ever seen. Straight and fair; well behaved, too! A good influence for the boy. He and young Mark Wetherell are getting too wild. Tone 'em down a bit. Just what they need at this time—"

Clara Callender raised her eyes, dull with resentment, for a moment, and glanced at her husband.

"And what of the stories we hear?"

"Piff!" the Colonel exploded in his rage. "A fine pack of servants' gabble and backstairs' gossip. I wonder you listen to it."

Clara Callender bit her pale lips again until they showed red under the thin skin.

"You forget that my information came from my sister."

The Colonel stopped his striding walk long enough to ejaculate:

"Fiddlesticks! The more shame to her! Anyway, it's

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preposterous to discriminate against the child on account of some supposed foolishness on the part of the mother. It isn't the mother I'm asking you to be decent to. May be no truth in the whole story, anyhow. Your sister always was a busybody. Like as not she's got the people all mixed up. Been better occupied to mind her own business. Dare say it'll all turn out to be a pack of lies. How can she tell who the woman is? Besides, that's got nothing to do with the child. I say she's a nice child and ought to come here oftener. And damme! I mean she shall!"

Clara Callender, a tall, delicate-featured creature with fair hair, pale skin and the indomitable mouth of those who inevitably get their own way, again raised her eyes to his face; blue eyes with pale lashes, like faded replicas of Donald's; surprise evident in her arched brows and the faint pucker of her mouth. She shrugged slightly and threw out her hands in a gesture, almost plaintive, of capitulation.

"Very well. As you like. I'm sure I've never said she wasn't to come. I've scarcely seen the child; never said two words to her myself. I've never asked her here, and I've certainly never sent her home. I don't know why you should think she has been."

"Been what?"

"Sent home."

"Damn it! I tell you it myself!"

Mrs. Callender sighed. In this mood she knew it was better to humour her husband. He could be so nasty, and she detested scenes. They always gave her headaches. Yes, it would be better to agree with him now, for, after all, she could do as she liked in the matter later. He was like that, the Colonel, keen on a subject for a time, terribly keen, but he forgot easily. Once give him his own way and there was no great danger of the thing being brought

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up again unless the disobedience was flagrant, and she could guard against that.

"As you like," she said again, with the air of having had her duty too plainly pointed out to her: "I'll instruct the servants as to your wishes."

Peter Callender stood in the centre of the grey rug and frowned. He had rather braced himself for a firmer resistance, and her reply left him off his poise. He "hawed" and "hemmed" as was his wont when embarrassed, and then brought out:

"You needn't tell 'em—the servants, I mean. That's no way to go about it. That'd only call attention to the child. It's what I'm complaining of. There ought to be no difference made between her and the others—Wetherell's boy, for instance. He comes here often enough."

Again Mrs. Callender sighed. "Very well. But I don't see what it is you want me to do. As I say, I've scarcely seen the child to speak to myself; but if you don't want me to instruct the servants, and yet complain if they're not told—" Her tone was of one who suffers greatly with the forbearance worthy of a saint.

The Colonel tapped his foot impatiently.

"You might tell the one I have in mind not to interfere."

"You mean Martha?" meekly plaintive.

"I mean that damned squint-eyed one," Callender broke out impatiently. He knew that Clara knew which one of the maids he meant. The hard-featured Martha was his pet abomination; and with the contrariness of womankind, Clara chose particularly to favour and pamper her above the others of the household.

The offended wife reached for the bottle of toilet water on her dressing table and ostentatiously bathed her temples. This would undoubtedly mean a headache before

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night if it kept up much longer. Aloud she said, in a tone that sounded conciliatory on the surface, but was meant to irritate :

"I am sure Martha never presumes."

"But I tell you I caught her myself—sending the child home. Damned disagreeable and unpleasant she was, too. She'd no right to say who should play with Donald and who shouldn't." He began his impatient stride once more.

"I think you must have exaggerated it."

"I tell you I heard her. If I hadn't been engaged with Hayley at the time I'd have gone after the little tike and brought her back myself. Blessed if I wouldn't!"

"But you didn't," she remarked icily.

"No," he mumbled. "But if it happens again I shall. Damme! if I won't!"

Mrs. Callender reached for the bell beside her table with an air of finality.

"It won't happen again, I assure you. And now, if you're quite through with me—if you've said all you wish to on the subject—it's really of so little importance after all—I'll have Martha in to brush my hair as I had planned before this—this outburst."

She paused enquiringly with her hand raised, poised above the bell. But Peter Callender did not mean to be dismissed without a final word.

"She's a damned sweet, pretty little girl! Fit as any one to play with that young scamp of ours. It's a shame for us to act like a pair of self-righteous fools in the matter. Just because her mother may or may not have run away with that good-looking rascal of a groom—"

"Quite," she interrupted coldly. Her eyes, faintly ironical, ran over her husband's burly figure blocked in the

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doorway. "Perhaps you would like me to call on the lady? We might have much in common."

It was a telling stroke. No one was more proud or more jealous of his wife's reputation than Peter Callender. It was his firm conviction that she was purer than other women; a horror to him that she should ever be sullied by the least contact with a more sordid atmosphere than that with which he had always surrounded her. In a way he was right. With her delicate elegance and thin asceticism, nature intended her for an old maid. But mistakes like these are sometimes made.

Peter paused and looked at her, cold and indomitable; and for a moment he felt the subtle instinct, almost of hate, into which years of misunderstanding and thwarted emotion had turned his feeling for her. He had loved her and married her in the face of violent opposition, with the perverse doggedness of a man who wants, and wants vigorously—whether it be for his good or no. Indeed, even at the time he was courting her, subconsciously he had known they were unsuited to one another; and it had but increased his desire. He felt that she was different, rarer, fashioned out of other material than the common lot; altogether a finer clay. He had felt it and still persevered in his suit, aware of his own coarseness by comparison. As if she resented his ultimate victory, she had never ceased to make him conscious of this inferiority. To-day she toyed with his impotence to combat it.

"Perhaps that is what you wish—that I call at the cottage?"

Colonel Callender looked up from under knit brows.

"I've not said that. It isn't a question of the grown-ups at all. God knows, if there's anything wrong, I don't want you mixed up with it!"

"Oh!" she said, and smiled sweetly.

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And so, defeated in the end, Peter Callender strode from the room.

2

The church of "St. Peter's by the Sea" stands on the high headland below Hodder's Beach, overlooking the broad reaches of the north Atlantic. It is an inconvenient location for the villagers of Whitridge, but its founders could not resist the picturesqueness of the surroundings, so there it was placed, a little above the clustered cottages around the life-saving station, and full in the blasts that in winter sweep across the sea and buffet in vain but angry remonstrance against its iron-studded door and sturdy stone sides.

It is an attractive little building, full of a romantic charm quite unusual to the churches of the neighbourhood. Squat and rugged, crowning the headland, limned against a fiery sunset as it was on that far-off autumn day when the Reverend Paul Wetherell first saw it, or in summer with a background of hazy blue, the sea spread out before, and the long line of the sand dunes to the right, with beyond them the salt marshes rich in rosy hues, it is a thing of infinite loveliness. Then the Reverend Paul loves it devotedly and would exchange it for no other parish in the world.

But in the winter it is a different matter. Then the drawbacks become evident. As the days advance and the cold increases, a congregation, small at the best of times, dwindles of a Sunday morning to a mere handful. Only the sturdiest can buffet their way against the wind up the rocky path in the open, with the wires of the life-saving station creaking below. Mark Wetherell, the rector's son, had even known times when his father and he had held service alone in the shuddering draughts of an empty

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church, after an hour's struggle through the storm. For the Reverend Paul Wetherell was one who never deviated by a hair's breadth from his duty.

The rectory is at some little distance; just on the outskirts of the village, at the end of Whitridge's long main street; a quiet, comfortable-looking house, low-roofed, set well back in a garden of old-fashioned flowers, hollyhocks, geraniums and the like, and well shaded with trees, so that in summer the house is quite dark, almost sombre in effect. Here the Reverend Paul has lived for the past eighteen years.

"Dominie Wetherell," as most of the villagers call him (for there are few of his own faith in Whitridge), "the Rector," as Mrs. Wetherell always speaks of him, an odd, silent man with lightning flashes of intellectual vigour and a curious obtuseness in matters of humanity, is not the best liked man in the village.

For this the Reverend Paul is scarcely to be held responsible. No man could be more earnest, sincere, more selfless in his devotion to the interests of his people; but the very qualities which stand out most prominently in his nature are the ones which, in his eighteen years' incumbency and contact with his parishioners, have failed to gain him the affection and trust he had hoped for.

He began full of hope, as all young clergymen do; but he was, in the first place, a scholar, and while he was sufficiently practical to realise that his parishioners could not be expected to possess like attainments, he was unable to understand that they would not have a scholar's viewpoint and attitude towards the things of everyday life. More than that he was a man preoccupied with a strange inward struggle of which the world understood nothing; not the commonplace struggle of the ascetic with the things of the flesh, but a moral struggle against a foe

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more insidious. Men thought him taciturn, unapproachable; he was, in truth, a disappointed man.

He had known himself capable of rising to great heights, yet something of which he was vaguely conscious held him back—a sort of spiritual laziness which united with his quite unusual fund of nervous energy to overthrow his intentions. At times he would attribute it to unattained ambition; but in his heart he knew that this was not the truth, realising that “the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.” In many an hour of prayerful vigil he had told himself that this was so—that the fault was within. He had longed to go abroad preaching the gospel of Christ throughout the world, thrilling men with his eloquence, making converts among widely differentiated nations, holding dominion over them through the power of his Master; and instead he was but a country parson in an inconsequential, struggling New England parish; knowing himself, by his natural gifts, worthy of greater things, and, with the zeal of a fanatic, struggling for the freedom of his soul.

When these thoughts came he rebuked himself for his pride and arrogance. Instead of swaying souls he listened to the petty gossip of a country village; and writhed in his own inability to cut loose from it all.

Why had he come here eighteen years ago? Why had he stayed? Perhaps the waves beating below the cliffs had decided him when he stood upon the church steps on that autumn afternoon so long ago, and saw the sunset like a vision of God’s handiwork in the sky. For he was a man sensitive to all forms of beauty. Perhaps it was only that spiritual laziness of which we have spoken, and which seemed to say, “Stay here; why look further for a field of endeavour?” At all events, he had remained.

With only one more word of explanation you have the

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man. His was a wonderful and surprising natural purity. It accounted in a large measure for his inflexible attitude towards evil, his unflinching denunciations and that lack of humanity of which the villagers were vaguely conscious, although they could give it no name.

Only one person in all Whitridge understood him. Not even Mark, much as he loved his father, could do that. But, fortunately for the Reverend Paul, he was blessed with a wife who not only understood and sympathised with him, but who had the cleverness not to let him see that she did, and to hide her knowledge.

Cynthia Wetherell was one of those rare spirits who know the world without being in the least worldly. Also, she was one of those women who exist wholly and unquestioningly for the men to whom they have given themselves. With this priceless devotion she combined infinite tact and a true sense of proportion. Upright as her husband, of a moral fibre equal, if not superior, to his, there yet existed in her a vein of commonalty which enabled her on more than one occasion to guide and direct her husband's energies, to smooth the road before him in many a rough spot. It was her constant aim to shield him; to stand as a buffer between him and the world. But handicapped by her ill health this was not always possible. With perfect health, Cynthia Wetherell would have been a superwoman. As it was, she suffered under the most terrible disadvantages. A constitution naturally delicate had been all but spent in giving birth to her son, which event had occurred some five years after her marriage to the young, good-looking clergyman.

Cynthia went with joy to her sacrifice. "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced," she might have said with another mother, although the cost to her was all but life itself. She never recovered; living in a

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state of semi-invalidism; so that Mark early in life learned the restrictions and demands of a sick room, the need for treading softly and speaking in whispers; knew wakeful nights passed by his father's side in an agony of suspense, or, curled up in his father's study, kept vigil through dark hours.

But Cynthia Wetherell was in spirit no weakling, and she saw to it that in her hours of comparative health and freedom from pain Mark should have the normal life of a strong healthy boy. When she was feeling fit he might be as noisy as he pleased, filling the house with his playmates, leading his "gang" upstairs and down, in and out of the old rectory. Thus in alternating storm and sunshine Mark grew under her tender care and guidance into a normal, healthy, sturdy little boy. He was known in the village as "a likable little chap," and he had an easy way of meeting people halfway that his father would have given much to possess. He was impetuous and daring, but nobody had ever seen him in a temper. Cynthia adored him, looked on and smiled. She knew that Mark would be able to take care of himself and she was glad.

But for Paul, her husband, it was different. As far as lay in her power she must still stand between him and the sordid things of life. Even in that affair of the handsome Mrs. Pritchard who had come to live in the cottage below the Callender estate, she had tried to spare him. He had never guessed that there was anything wrong until some yokel in the village meeting place, forgetting the clergyman's presence, had blurted out the gossip. The Reverend Paul came home white and shaking with offended sensibilities. His indignation first on the one side and then on the other was unlimited.

"It's a crime! a disgrace! Ben Nutting should be cen-

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sured for talking like that in a public place. It's a fiendish thing, maligning a woman! I'll not endure it! I wish I had spoken my mind to him at the time. I was weak to ignore it. I shall go to him later."

"But—but perhaps it may be true," Cynthia ventured timidly.

"What?" The Reverend Paul turned on her fiercely. "What do you mean? Why do you say that?"

Cynthia sighed. "I was in hopes you would hear nothing about it. But I'm afraid there's very little doubt. There's been a good deal of talk. Ben Nutting is not the only one. People will say things, you know."

"Why? Because the woman is alone? Because she has no one to protect her good name?"

"But you see that's the trouble—she isn't really alone."

"She is a married woman."

"There is certainly no husband apparent."

"She may be a widow."

"Yes, of course. But she doesn't say she is. And some one sent down some papers—almost a year back, they were. Their pictures were in them—hers and the man she employs."

"That may be; it doesn't prove anything."

The Reverend Paul turned away dissatisfied; but he was less sure than he had been. He returned to the attack several days later:

"What am I to do about this woman in my parish who is giving cause for all this scandal?"

"Must you do anything?" Cynthia's tone was doubtful. She dreaded the inevitable struggle which she knew must come.

"You knew of this thing," he said. "Why did you not speak to me of it long ago?" It was as if he had read her inmost thoughts.

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"Yes, I knew. But I wanted to spare you. I knew you would feel it. I hoped you might never know."

"Why? Am I not here to attend the spiritual wants of my people?"

"But that is just it. This woman isn't of your people; there is nothing to do."

The rector frowned.

"I believe in a practical Christianity that does not recognise the restrictions of church or creed. The woman eloped with her groom. Aside from other considerations, shall I allow this insult to my parish to go unheeded? What does it signify whether the woman attends my services or not?"

"Wouldn't it be best," Cynthia suggested timidly, "not to notice it? I cannot see why you should be mixed up with it." She disliked intensely the idea of Paul exposed to the inevitable indignation, perhaps the mockery, of this woman. She had never seen Elaine Pritchard herself, but she had heard tales of her from Mrs. Jerrold when the latter brought up to the rectory various delicacies for the invalid—"a hard-faced hussy," Mrs. Jerrold had called her.

"I believe," repeated the rector in a stern tone, and a manner that was distinctly reminiscent of the one he used in the pulpit, "in a practical Christianity. If this woman is, in truth, living in sin, here in the midst of my parish, it is my duty to remonstrate with her. What difference whether she be of my congregation or no? Sin is sin whomsoever it is committed by, and immorality is immorality!"

"Ah, but who is to say that it is that?" Cynthia broke in hurriedly. "You don't actually know anything. It may be all false, as you yourself once pointed out. And admitting that, think how you would feel?"

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"That is true."

The rector wavered.

"And they have a right to live. So long as there is no public scandal—"

"Bah! I hate those worldly sophistries!"

But Cynthia knew she had conquered. She played her trump card.

"It would get all over the village if you were to speak to her. And you know the woman has her living to make. Might there not be danger of injuring her? That, surely, is not a Christian thing to do."

"True, true."

"There is the little girl," Cynthia pursued. "We might ask her to send the little girl to Sunday school."

The Reverend Paul Wetherell frowned. This sounded tame to him. He was for cleansing with whips of fire. But he knew Cynthia to be right.

She saw her advantage and followed it up.

"If we shun her we shall but set an example to others. The thing is deplorable, no doubt; but, after all, we know nothing of the temptations, the trials, the terrible circumstances that may have led to this situation; and who are we to sit in judgment?"

Her husband started. "You are right," he said with sudden humility. "I am a Pharisee—a miserable Pharisee! I will go to my study now and pray for forgiveness. How often you are right! I was a fool, but I will be guided by you."

Cynthia watched him go with tears in her eyes. She hated to see him like that, so contrite, so humble and he so good! It hardened her a little so that later she took courage to say:

"It is agreed that no distinction shall be made about that little girl from the cottage, Paul, isn't it? But I'd rather

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Mark did not go there. She may come here to play whenever she likes. She is a sweet child and Mark likes her. Thus we shall not show approval of the cottage, but, on the other hand, we shall not be the first to cast a stone."

And her husband agreed as usual: "Right, quite right, my dear!"

Thus it was that Marian kept her friends at both houses.

CHAPTER III

I

“MOTHER, when may I learn to ride?”

Across the cottage parlour Marian regarded her mother wistfully. The years fleeting by, flecked with sun and shadow, had changed the child of ten to the girl of thirteen. Taller, straighter, her lithe little figure still kept its boyish outlines; her eyes grey and clear as ever; her firm little chin, resolute, tilted, was the same; but all gave promise of greater beauty to come. A cloud of fair hair, like a halo, encircled her head and caught the light from the lamp in golden patches as she looked up enquiringly.

“Mother, when may I learn to ride?”

Elaine Pritchard looked at the girl thoughtfully, and bit a thread in two between her large, handsome teeth before she replied with a slight shrug:

“Oh, in a year or two, I expect, if you care about it. Not now certainly. I’ve bother enough with the others without trying to teach you to sit a horse.”

“But I can stay on quite nicely already,” Marian hastened to explain. “Ted’s put me up on Beauty and led me around the stable yard lots of times. Haven’t you, Ted? And on grey Peter, too. I can sit well already. I’m sure I could learn awfully easily. I’m not afraid, you know.”

“No, I don’t suppose a child of mine would ever be

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afraid of a horse," replied her mother drily, and went on with her sewing, her eyes resting for a fleeting instant on the handsome profile of Ted Chamberlayne who sat directly across the table from her under the lamp, his eyes busy with the evening paper.

Marian watched her mother silently, wistfully, for a time, hoping for some further encouragement of her hopes; but none was forthcoming. It seemed to her that this time her mother *must* understand and sympathise. The desire to ride had grown daily, almost hourly, with her, until of late it had become almost an obsession. It would be so easy, too, for her mother to grant the request, with all those horses about. Horses and dogs, indeed, appeared to be the only things plentiful about the cottage. But so far her mother had always refused the request proffered a number of times before, putting her off from week to week and month to month with the same excuse—she was too tired. It was wearisome enough teaching the others, the children she was paid to teach—or there wasn't time, and she had trouble enough already. Marian recognised the force of these arguments. Her mother really worked very hard. With the majority of her pupils drawn from Thornton, it meant a lot of extra riding, for the children must usually be escorted home and the horses brought back. Her mother was in the saddle early and late; quite true that she had her hands full.

Nevertheless, she wanted most desperately to learn to ride.

Ted, when appealed to on the subject in the privacy of the stable yard, had been vaguely sympathetic, and on one or two occasions consented to act as coach for a short trot around the yard; but there was always the danger of these excursions being overseen and put a stop to or forbidden for the future; and there was the insuperable

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fact that the stable yard was too cramped for cantering, that most alluring of accomplishments.

And to-night Ted said nothing to help her; so Marian was silent. Her mother stitched industriously on the black habit she was mending, a faint frown showing between her eyebrows. Ted Chamberlayne on the other side of the table continued to read his paper in complete absorption. Marian watched her mother's swiftly flying fingers and reflected on the black habit. It was odd that she always rode side-saddle when she taught. Ted had tried to persuade her out of it, but it was one of her affectations. Perhaps she knew how well she looked on a horse in that garb.

After an interval, and in a pause while Elaine threaded a needle, the child spoke again.

"Donald Callender has a new horse. Not a pony. He's not to ride that any more. It's a big horse this time; bigger than Mark's Jacko. Mark is riding this year, too."

Her mother was silent, regarding the child speculatively.

"I'd like to ride, too," Marian added gently. "If I had a horse and could ride, we could all three go out together—Donald and Mark and me. It would be great fun."

Elaine put down the habit she was mending. Once again she cast a fleeting glance across the table at Ted Chamberlayne who, oblivious of the talk going on around him, was plodding systematically through the editorials, his handsome, stupid face as expressionless as usual.

Finding no response to her half-interrogatory glance in that direction, her mother turned back to Marian.

"You'd like to ride very much?"

"Oh, so much, mother. Please say I may. I know I could learn in no time at all."

Elaine Pritchard snipped the last thread and folded up

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the mended habit. "Well, so you shall," she agreed cheerfully. "We'll begin to-morrow with the small pony. I dare say I can slip you in between lessons. You'll have to be ready to hop on whenever I happen to have time to give you. After I get you started, of course you might ride out with Ted a bit. I won't have you seen on the roads, however, until you're quite perfect. I can't afford to have you ride in a slovenly fashion, you understand."

"Oh, mother!" cried Marian joyfully. "May I really begin to-morrow? Quite—quite early?"

"I dare say." Elaine's manner was remote. "We'll have to fix you up a habit some way. Perhaps I can rig you out in one of mine for the present. Stand up." She critically surveyed her daughter's height and carriage. "I declare I didn't know you were so tall. Yes, I dare say one of mine will do—so long as you don't try walking about in it. I'm going to teach you to ride side-saddle first. After you've mastered that, perhaps it would be better for you to ride the other way. You can choose that yourself. But a woman's got to be able to ride side-saddle to ride well. I'll teach you to sit as none of those others can," she added with rising enthusiasm. "You won't be like those stupid little brats I've been training. You'll see. I'll make you the best horsewoman in the country!"

"Oh, mother!" Marian could only ejaculate again.

"It's little enough to do for you," Elaine said carelessly. A slight frown settled on her forehead. "I only wish I could mount you as you ought to be mounted. But that's out of the question. However, there's Pepina, she's a decent little beast and a good size for you. She'll carry you nicely. Not what you ought to have; but she'll do. Her gait's fair. Don't you think so, Ted?"

Ted Chamberlayne raised his mild brown eyes from the

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paper he was reading and stared at her for an instant, rather as though he had been asleep.

"Eh, what's that? What'd you say, Elaine? The mare's all right, isn't she? I don't think she's at all lame."

"I said she's the best nag we've got," replied Elaine severely. Ted looked somewhat crushed.

"And would do for Marian to ride later on. I'm going to teach her to ride. We're going to start lessons with the pony to-morrow."

"Good idea," agreed Ted as he turned back to his paper. "Never can start 'em too young. She'll learn in no time. Take to it like a duck to water. Be a credit to you. Might bring you pupils."

"That's what I was thinking," Elaine remarked thoughtfully; but it was not of that alone that she was thinking. What had influenced her more profoundly was the news of Donald Callender's new horse. A new horse and Donald would be riding about the roads around Whitridge, more or less. Marian needed playmates. It might help the child. Poor child! And Elaine Pritchard's eyes softened for a moment as she looked at her daughter, and filled for just a second with quite unusual tears.

2

The manner in which Elaine Pritchard's predictions were fulfilled and Marian came to ride with Donald Callender almost as often as she rode with Mark Wetherell, until they both went away to school, was characteristic of Peter Callender's bluff heartiness. The way was simple; the results various. But let the Colonel tell the story himself.

Once more he is conversing with his wife, not in the privacy of the boudoir this time, but in the great drawing-room downstairs. Be patient with me if I introduce you

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once more to an intimate conversation between husband and wife.

The Colonel is not in a temper this time, and his rather rough voice rings with a new note, a note of real and somewhat surprised admiration. He has but lately returned from a visit to the Pritchard cottage and is full of his visit, entirely too full of it, Clara Callender thinks. But let us hear what he says:

"I went down to the cottage. Nice little place it is. I'd forgotten what a little beauty spot it was. Haven't set foot in it for years; not since that poor woman bought it and moved in. Used to be there quite a lot when Tom Barrows had it, he and his wife. They didn't get along any too well, I remember. . . . Haven't been in it since they busted up. Haven't been within sight of it that I can remember. Don't know why, I'm sure. *I've* got no quarrel with that woman down there, even if she has taken the bit in her mouth. . . . Damme! I rather admire her. No reason why I shouldn't have gone there before.

"Well, I went there to-night. She came to the door herself. Blessed if I didn't feel kind of ashamed—never taking any notice of her before. I hadn't thought about it before. But the roan mare was sick. . . . I got tired of Hayley's philandering. That man Chamberlayne knows about horses. I happened to be driving past. I thought of it. I stopped and went in. She received me like a queen!

"I said: 'I've got a mare that's sick. Hayley, my groom, doesn't know what's the matter. I don't want to send for the veterinarian if it isn't necessary. Damned nuisance those fellows are; dose your horse and like as not put him out of business for a month. I thought perhaps Chamberlayne 'd be good enough to run over and

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take a look at her; give his opinion whether to have in the vet or not.'

"She looked at me with that high, imperious look of hers—high and mighty like—you know what I mean; and said: 'Certainly. I'm quite sure he'd be very glad to help you if he can. I'll speak to him about it.'

"I said: 'Thanks. He isn't about now?'

"'No,' she said, 'he's not in now and won't be till late. I'll mention it to him at breakfast though,' and she looked me straight in the eye and smiled. Not funny, you know, just superiorlike. Damme! she knows what people think and what they say; and damme! she doesn't care a damn! By Gad, I admire the woman!"

"You would!" Clara Callender's tone was faintly contemptuous.

"So I said to her," the Colonel continued, "I said to her: 'Thanks again. I'd be obliged if you would'; and then she ushered me to the door like any queen. The woman's got breeding, hanged if she hasn't! And at the door I wanted to say something, so I said: 'I see your little girl has taken up riding,' I said. 'Good little horsewoman she is,' I said, 'I'd be glad if you'd let her ride sometimes with my boy.'

"She only smiled and I got a little flustered and I said: 'We've had him taught at home y'know—our own grooms and all that—so he don't need lessons; but if you'd let her ride with him occasionally, I've no doubt he'd pick up a lot. He might sit better, you know.' There's nothing the matter with Don's seat, of course, and she knows it; but I had to make some excuse—sounded so kind of patronising and awkward without it—asking her to ride with him."

Clara Callender frowned. "I see no reason why excuses should be necessary for asking permission for Colonel

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Callender's son to ride with a child of that sort," she remarked icily. But the Colonel only laughed.

"You've never met the lady. You'd understand if you had."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Callender affected to be amused. "You think I might be awed by her?"

"No, I don't think that," and Peter Callender laughed aloud. Clara did not like his laugh.

"No," he gave his verdict judicially, a moment later. "No, I don't think you'd be awed by her, and I don't think she'd be afraid of you." He laughed again as if at some amusing speculation. "It wouldn't be much of a meeting when you two got together, perhaps; yet, damme! I'd like to be there to see it!"

He went away chuckling.

3

So Marian rode her pony beside Donald Callender's Prince and Mark Wetherell's Jacko up and down the countryside. And Clara Callender watched with ever increasing uneasiness the progress of their friendship. Her course was plain before her.

When Peter Callender left his wife on the occasion of their last repeated conversation, he fancied that in that matter of the horseback riding he had once for all settled that perplexed question—should the little girl from the cottage be allowed to associate with the heir of the Callenders. There was no affectation about the Colonel. He had insisted because he knew himself to be in the right. He went away and left Clara, carrying with him the firm conviction that he had conquered. It is a mistake which many men of masterful manner make.

There was no actual revolt. Once, indeed, Clara took occasion to drop a slight hint.

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"Apart from other considerations, do you think this intimacy is wise?"

"Wise? Why not?" The Colonel was mystified.

"Well, there's always the question of an attachment. Young people think they want to marry."

Peter stared at her aghast.

"Good God! You're not marrying the boy off at his age!"

"One must think of such things," said Clara primly.

The Colonel began to bluster. "Nonsense! It's preposterous! I'll have no such nonsense talked about!" Angered he left the room and nothing further was said. Clara was a dutiful wife and outwardly she obeyed his instructions. But the incident only confirmed her in a resolve she had previously made that Donald should go away to boarding school somewhat earlier than they had planned. They know how to manage these things at the good schools. They keep undesirable boys out and those who have undesirable sisters. Yes, it would be better if Donald went this year instead of next.

She had consultations with Mrs. Wetherell about Mark. It was a pity Mark couldn't go this year, too; but in that matter Cynthia was obdurate. Mark was too young still, she protested. And she wanted him with her a little longer.

Clara sighed and went back home; but did not give up her idea. It would have been nice for Donald to have Mark there with him just at first, to break whatever homesickness there might be; and it might have been easier to bring Peter around to her point of view if he knew Mr. Wetherell's boy was going at the same time. However, there would only be a year's difference. Cynthia had said Mark could follow Donald the following fall. It was all on the cards that they should be together.

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Some weeks later Marian told her mother: "Donald can't ride with me any more. He's going away to school. But Mark will be here. He'll ride with me."

There was no dissatisfaction in her tone.

4

"Gee whiz! That was a tight squeeze!"

The boy from the rectory wriggled out between the two layers, shaped like an upper and nether millstone, of a narrow fissure cleft in the rock, then turned to watch his companion struggle through. He made no effort to help her; that would have been an affront.

"I knew we could do it," said the little girl, standing and beginning to straighten the hair which had fallen in straggled masses over her eyes.

"I couldn't if it had been one half inch smaller."

"There was one moment when I thought we were stuck!"

They laughed delightedly, exultantly, now the difficulty was past; sitting down on the hard shelf of rock in the strong sunlight and rubbing the dust stains from shoulders, knees and elbows. The sea wind blew in cool and refreshing; an angle of the rocks cut off all but a narrow segment of open water beyond.

"That was something to do, though, you can bet!" Mark threw a glance, half casual, half triumphant, over his shoulder at the black opening of the crevice through which they had crawled, somewhat to the detriment of their clothes, it must be admitted.

"Well, I'm glad. I've always wanted to try it."

"So've I."

Silence for a time while they worked diligently at the dust stains. There was a hole in a little girl's stocking at the knee; she considered it thoughtfully.

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"I'll bet Donald couldn't have done that," said the boy boastfully.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because! He'd be afraid of getting himself all dirty like this. Don's getting to be an awful dandy. I saw him, you know, when my father and I went over to look at the school. He's changed a lot."

"I don't care," replied the little girl. "I miss him like everything. Don't you?"

Mark nodded. His face grew suddenly intensely serious. "It'll never be quite the same again. We did have good times together, didn't we?"

"And you'll be gone, too, next term." The little girl's voice was mournful, distressed. She looked at the boy and saw that his mood corresponded to her own. His face grew even more disconsolate.

"No more rides, no more picnics, no more exploring! Oh, dear! And yet it will be fun going away to school. Marian," he said suddenly, "let's always remember to-day; let's mark it in some way—so we won't forget. Let's—oh, I don't know how to say it—but let's swear eternal friendship—come what may we'll stick together. We could do that, at least."

"Yes," she said, "we can take an oath we'll never forget to-day—the day we shared danger in the enchanted cavern—nor—nor any of our good times together."

"Yes," he agreed, "we'll swear an oath always to be friends!"

There was something solemn and momentous and mysterious in putting it this way. They clasped hands in silence. They were intensely serious. The broad sunlight slanted down on the white rocks and on their eager, earnest faces.

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"Promise you'll never forget to-day and that we'll always be friends."

"I promise," said the little girl solemnly.

"So do I." Mark looked away at the shining blue strip of horizon. Great and noble thoughts filled his mind.

"Let's promise for Donald, too," the little girl whispered. "We'll all be friends always—the three of us—forever."

"All right. I'll promise for Don."

"And we'll save one another in danger!"—The little girl became eloquent—"and comfort one another in sorrow; and stand by one another through thick and thin and no one shall come between us!"

"Oh, yes," Mark agreed. They were getting a bit beyond his depth now.

The little girl rose and shook the last bits of crumbled rock from her skirts. "Oh, dear! it makes me feel sad to have Donald gone and you going, too, so soon."

He sat still, legs pushed out before him, watching her.

"What'll you do?"

"I don't know. I may go away to school, too. Mother's talking about it. Only think, we may be as old as old can be when we meet again!"

He laughed at that. This was too absurd. After all, he wasn't going until next year.

They climbed down the rocks and wandered in desultory fashion home towards the village. They parted at the rectory gate. The sound of music came through the open windows. Cynthia Wetherell was singing. Mark walked up the path and slipped unnoticed into the room. It was cool and dark inside. His mother was at the piano in the far corner, her profile shadowy against the dark wall behind.

Mark curled himself up in his father's big chair by

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the window and listened. She was singing low and softly, some old-world song of touching sweetness that seemed to speak of "old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago." It made the tears come into Mark's eyes, he could not tell why, and his heart swell with a new, vibrant emotion, age old in its humanity. The song and the remembrance of Marian's words concerning their friendship mingled together to give him a feeling of immense and romantic responsibility. He began to revolve in his mind pictures of himself and Marian and Donald under all sorts of circumstances; he saw himself rescuing the other two from the most unheard-of dangers—a very Bayard for courage.

His pride in himself swelled, grew big; the whole setting of his daydream changed imperceptibly. Troubadours and Crusaders stalked through his imagination, 'infidels thundered at the gate. As he looked out of the window, the hedge by the picket fence became a close-set phalanx of foemen's spears; King Arthur's knights rode out in wavering shadows from behind the lilac bush in the corner of the yard; Marian became on the moment a princess, a lady of high degree, and Donald a noble knight, the greatest in the land, and to both was he devoted esquire and defender.

Cynthia's voice rose and fell in tender cadences, a tide of sweetness; sank; grew still. A door clashed as the Reverend Paul entered. Cynthia rose abruptly from the piano and her clear, crisp voice broke the spell.

"Mark, you'd better go and wash your face and hands for supper now; there's father."

The dream was over.

CHAPTER IV

I

MARIAN stepped out of the little lane back of the paddock onto the white road which led towards Thornton. It was a warm day and the cool patches of shade along the road were refreshing. She was in no hurry, and the prospect of fields bright with sunlight, softly rounded hills grey in the distance, and the tang of salt air fresh from the sea (for the wind, what there was of it, was from the east) filled her with a keen satisfaction that had in it all the delicate longing of youth.

She walked easily with lithe, swinging steps; slender, graceful. Years had not changed her much. At sixteen she was taller, a little fuller of breast, more robust and straighter of carriage; but she still wore her fair hair hanging down her back, her resolute little chin tilted upward as of old, and there was about her something aloof and virginal and very young.

Her skirts were shorter than those of most girls of her age. She was conscious of this at times, but her mother did not appear to notice it, and there seemed to be nothing to be done about it. Vague questions and doubts, other than those about the skirts, were beginning to trouble her somewhat of late. She was at the period when she should have been exactly like other girls of her own age, a mere replica in thought as well as outward appearance, and vaguely she perceived that this was not so. She felt just a little odd—out of it. She was somehow different.

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Instead of being pleased at this evidence of a distinct personality, she was remotely distressed and anxious about it. As far as possible she did her best to ignore it, not to think of it—yet there certainly was a difference.

There had, of course, been the difference at school—that school from which she had been sent home after a few weeks. The angry tears which used to come into her eyes at the mere remembrance had ceased long ago; but the hurt of it was still there. Only they had not guessed how it had hurt.

The dreadful conference with Miss Day, the head mistress, which sought so difficultly to explain what was apparently inexplicable. It was no fault of her own, they said. The puzzled wonderment of those first few days; the hurried return journey and her mother's tight-lipped reticence upon her arrival—they were all things of the past now.

She knew now what it was all about, she hadn't then; and why Miss Day had talked so confusedly about "the good of the other girls . . . the good of the school." They had simply found out about Ted, that was all. Miss Day had said, "For, of course, if you had been living with your father—" Looking back at it in the light of her own present knowledge it was all so dreadful, so unnecessary and cruel. She had wondered and questioned and at last something her mother had said told her. It had come to her in a flash—like that; terrible for a little while but there appeared nothing to be done about it.

Loyalty to her mother and Ted kept her silent after that one lightning flash of realisation. But it had been a horrible month, that first one after her return. Ted had gone about, gloomy and forlorn, dejected, avoiding her eyes, seemingly more clumsy and awkward than ever. Her mother had been silent or impatient by turns, chiefly

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towards Ted. Marian she treated with an unusual kindness, a pathetic attempt towards sympathy—even lending the girl her own horse to ride. It was a sacrifice. Marian knew it and cherished the tenderness which prompted it, in spite of the awkwardness with which it was vouchsafed.

Marian felt very old at this time; much older than her mother and Ted. They were rather like children caught in a naughty act. But she must be kind to them and not let them see that she was hurt. She had not really cared about the school. She told herself that a hundred times over. She was better pleased to go back to old Mr. Horner for a time, and then to the Thornton High School for her instruction. But the incident made her painfully self-conscious and wary of any unusual kindness, ashamed, in spite of herself. That was why, although she still saw Mark occasionally, she no longer went to see Mrs. Wetherell at the rectory as she had been wont to do.

To-day she put the remembrance of all these things firmly from her and walked on a little more rapidly along the Thornton road. She saw fields on either side of her, bright with devil's-paintbrush and crimson fireweed, and the hot line of green trees, heavy with sunlight, that bounded the farthest meadow.

She put out her hand to brush it lightly over a clump of Queen Anne's lace, just out, which grew by the roadside. The soft spikiness of the lacy flowerets always gave her a peculiar thrill. It was just like lace—real lace. That was what grand ladies always had on their wedding dresses. Her own grandmother had had a veil all of lace like that. She had heard her mother describe it many times in the old days, the very old days, before they had come to Whitridge to live.

A lace dress was the next best thing to a velvet one—a red velvet with long flowing sleeves edged with ermine—

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such as the little St. Elizabeth wore in the well-thumbed story book at home with pictures by Reginald Birch. That had been what she used to think. The old idea crossed her mind dreamily now, as childish memories will sometimes come back to haunt us with our old forgotten dreams and aspirations, even when we are older and wiser than Marian. She, too, reminded herself that she was getting older.

A sudden turn in the road gave her a new vista, close-growing trees with a tiny stretch of woods running back from the road, and, unusual sight in the middle of a hot afternoon, a rider on horseback approaching at a walk. A small white terrier trotted nimbly ahead of him, darting from side to side of the road with sprightly animation.

She knew him instantly—Donald Callender, home on vacation—although she had heard no mention in the village that he was even expected. He had been making a round of visits to various schoolfellows most of the summer, she knew. The Callender house up on the hill had been closed for some time past; the family had been abroad or in the city and Donald in college a great part of the time. But the Colonel and Mrs. Callender had returned to Whitridge recently, and, of course, it was to be expected that Donald would reach home some time before college began again in the fall.

She walked more slowly in order to delay their meeting. They were still quite a distance apart and she was sure he had not yet observed her. Self-consciousness was just beginning to assert its hold upon her manner. And yet she was really anxious to see him, to talk with him again.

And yet was she? A kind of absurd terror made her want to turn around while there was yet time, and run back before he could follow her. Or she might step aside into

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the woods here at her right hand. Then she could watch him go by without the danger of being observed herself. Another time she could talk with him. She hesitated, and in that moment's hesitation her common sense reasserted itself. No, that was ridiculous! Why should she be afraid to meet him? They had been children together.

He looked terribly grown up though. He must be very tall when he was off the horse. She had not seen him for almost three years, for he had not come home between school and college; and he seemed to have changed a great deal. He came on more slowly. She thought he had already seen her standing there in the road, although as yet she did not think he had recognised her. Suddenly she realised that they had both grown up.

"I must go forward with dignity," she thought, "and as if I didn't *very* much care about meeting him; and I must pretend to be not at all surprised, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And I mustn't get red and stammer, I—"

There might have been time to compose herself quite completely, and to address herself to him with the dignity which she planned; but Fate anticipated her. There was a different meeting in store for her.

As she stepped out from the shadow of the wood, about to greet him, a shrill whistle sounded from the field on her right. There was a short, sharp bark, and of a sudden, with a yelp of delight, Pompey, the big white bulldog, bounded over the hedge and was leaping and jumping about her.

"Down, Pompey, down!" she called. "Down, I say. Go back!" She caught a glimpse through the hedge of Ted crossing the field behind Pompey. She took a step forward.

Then, in a flash, before the rider and horse could reach

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them, Pompey turned in the midst of a spring and his eye caught sight of the white terrier so confidently approaching.

Perhaps Pompey knew the horse Donald was riding to be a strange one—not one of the cottage string—and resented the fact with loyal jealousy; or it is possible that he merely sensed an infringement upon his own rights in the presence of the white terrier so close to the paddock. Certain it is that for a moment he stood rooted to his place; then, abruptly, his indignation concentrated, focusing itself on the unoffending terrier. He gave a snort, half of rage and half of derision, and bounded, teeth bared, towards the unfortunate interloper.

The terrier stood his ground bravely, at bay, for the space of half a second, then turned and fled precipitately under the horse's heels.

But Pompey was too quick for him. Like lightning he pounced; he snarled; he tore. Shrill cries rent the air. Pandemonium reigned; there was chaos—"confusion worse confounded!"—as Pompey and the terrier rolled in a jumbled mass of hind legs, forelegs, snapping mouths and blood-curdling screams in the dust of the road.

With a cry Marian ran forward. At the first onslaught the frightened horse careened wildly, but Donald held him well in hand, and, standing up in his stirrups, lashed at both dogs with his riding whip. Ted came crashing through the hedge onto the road.

"Hi, stop, Pompey! Hi! Stop! I say! What the devil!" "Here, take your damned brute away. Pull him off, can't you? Why don't you do something?" "Oh, Ted, please, please hurry!" A confused medley of cries to add to the dogs' uproar.

Marian was in the thick of it, calling, beating, imploring; the dogs seemed to be all about her. By a miracle

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she was not bitten. Ted saw her and called to her savagely: "Here, come out of there! Let them go. You can't stop them now! It'll be over in a minute."

"Yes, over for my dog!" cried Donald angrily; and springing out of his saddle, he, too, joined the fray.

It was Ted, however, who, in spite of his expressed caution, did the most valiant service in separating them. He caught Pompey's collar at last, and, by dint of much tugging, adjuration, and by the force of his years of iron training (he was always master of his dogs), persuaded him loose. The terrier took one final terrified snap at his rescuer's hand, then scurried away into the bushes whither Donald followed and retrieved him.

Ted, holding Pompey in leash with one hand, was negligently wiping the blood from the back of the other on his breeches as Donald reappeared, the terrier in his arms. Pompey's tongue lolled out and he lunged, straining at his leash, as his eyes again encountered his enemy, but Ted's grip was strong.

Young Callender was hot with indignation. "I say you," he demanded fiercely of Ted, "what do you mean by letting a great ugly brute like that loose on the roads? You ought to keep him chained up! It's a disgrace letting him go unleashed like that. He'd have killed my dog if I hadn't stopped him. He's a damned nuisance; and you're to blame letting him go about loose like that!"

Ted looked at his torn hand a moment before replying. He put the hand to his lips and spat out the blood defiantly. It made a dark red spot in the dusty road. For the first time Marian realised, with a flash of shame, that he looked like a groom.

He looked at Donald. "You shut your young trap," he said deliberately. "Another word from you and I'll let him loose again to finish up that cowardly little rat catcher

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of yours. If it hadn't been for me he'd have done it before; and a good job, too. I'm sorry I stopped him. Your dog's a cur," added Ted contemptuously.

Donald was obviously annoyed. He was not accustomed to being addressed thus, and it was true that his dog had cringed. He was very young and Ted's words seemed to him to be a reflection on himself.

"My dog's a blooded dog," he muttered.

"Bah!" Ted spat again. "Steady there, Pompey!" He looked again at Donald. "Why didn't you let 'em fight it out, then? That would show your beast's breeding. It always brings it out."

Donald flushed and hesitated. "My dog didn't begin it. He doesn't attack. He was taken by surprise. If you want to make it a personal matter—"

Ted's eyes lighted ominously. "Put your dog down, then, and we'll have another go. You back your dog and I'll back mine."

But Marian sprang forward.

"For shame, Ted! How dare you! It was all Pompey's fault, you know it was." Her eyes, ordinarily so grey and calm, flashed blue with anger. "For shame! how can you suggest such a thing?"

Ted did not look at her. He stood stubbornly watching the white terrier which still cowered in its master's arms. Pompey, straining at his leash, growled viciously. Ted's hand on the collar twitched, and a grim smile crept upon his lips. It was then that Marian proved herself mistress of the situation. She walked rapidly over to Donald and held out her arms for the terrier.

"Give him to me."

Donald looked at her, at the slim white arms outstretched to him, at her tall, sturdy figure and the resolute line of her mouth. In silence he gave the terrier, clutch-

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ing and trembling, into her arms. She turned to the other.

"Now, Ted, take Pompey home—at once." Her voice had a ring of command tinged with reproof. Ted stared at her for a moment—surprised, displeased; then, whistling a tune under his breath, he stooped, took a firmer hold on Pompey's collar and without another word led him, protesting, away.

Down the road they went, Ted with his eyes steadfastly before him, Pompey to the last looking back at Marian with bloodshot, reproachful eyes.

The others watched them out of sight. When they were gone, Marian stooped, and, with a little pat, set the terrier on the ground. She looked up and met Donald's eyes for a moment. His own were smiling. All trace of his recent irritation had vanished.

"I say, though, you're rather brave. The way you plunged into the midst of that affair. Weren't you scared? Not many girls could have done that. Most that I know would have screamed or fainted or something."

"Oh, I'm used to dogs," she replied carelessly. "We've always had a lot of them about, you know."

"I didn't. I thought it was horses."

"Oh, dogs and horses both."

There was a pause. Marian looked down and brushed some of the dust from her blouse where the terrier had rested. Donald went over to his horse which was quietly munching the grass by the roadside, and slipping the reins over his arm, led him back to where Marian was standing.

"I say," (funny the way he still used his old expression so constantly) "I say, before the dogs introduced us so precipitately, I thought you looked as though you were going to go by without speaking."

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She threw him a hasty glance and flushed crimson. She saw now how absurd her conduct must have seemed.

She reached up and patted the horse's nose, but without again raising her eyes to its master.

"I say, you weren't going to cut me?" he persisted.

She looked up then, a quick, rather frightened look, and saw that he was smiling down at her with an odd, attractive smile. She stood there patting the horse's nose and hoping he would not pause there but go on talking, for she was quite at a loss to find anything to say herself.

After a moment she was relieved to perceive that Donald did not labour under the same difficulty. He appeared somewhat amused at her sudden shyness, but he did not again press her for an answer to his question. Instead he slipped easily into an unembarrassed conversation on general topics, talking genially and gracefully of the life he had been leading since she last saw him.

"You were going this way; I'll walk along with you a bit." He slipped the reins from his arm as he spoke, and stepped to her side. Marian glanced back at the horse.

"Will he follow?"

"Oh, yes, he always does." Donald spoke negligently, although this devotion of the big black, this trick of the horse Nero was secretly his proudest boast. "Oh, yes, he'll follow. Just go on and pay no attention to him. You'll see."

They strolled on and, as he had said, the horse followed docilely at their heels, just as a dog might follow. As they walked Marian said very little. It was Donald who talked. Gaily and animatedly he sketched incidents in his life at college, told her of the visits he had recently been making at the houses of school friends and of the sports they had enjoyed there.

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"There's nothing like riding though, is there?" he finished, "and, strange to say, none of my friends, or very few, at least, seem to care about it. I've one friend though, a girl—in a way a sort of cousin of mine—who's crazy about it. And, by the way, she'll be down here soon. Coming to visit us at the Hall, you know. But there are a lot of other people coming, too. I don't know whether they'll let us ride much. When all my friends come I'll try to get the whole crowd out sometimes. There'll be a bunch of us. We may not have quite enough nags to go round—I'm hanged if I'll let any one else ride Nero—But I dare say your mother could help us out if we need more. You still have all those horses down at your place, I suppose," he added carelessly.

"Oh, yes," she agreed eagerly. "And I'm sure mother would let you have all you want. And then there's mine you might have."

He smiled again, loftily, at her earnestness. She seemed to him so pathetically anxious to please.

"Oh, you ride still, then?" His tone was splendidly patronising. "But of course I might know you do. Your mother still here and everything? I've not been home long enough to make many enquiries."

She nodded.

"Oh, yes, just the same. But I ride Nance now. She's our big mare. You remember? The one with the white star in the centre of her forehead."

"Can't say that I do exactly." He was tapping his shining black riding boot with his crop. "I've seen such a lot of horses since, you know. You'll have to show her to me again. You'll ride with me, won't you—until my friends come, I mean—or—er—rather before they come? I've been looking forward to quite a bit of it while I'm here. There isn't much else to do, is there? If you

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haven't a houseful all the time it's beastly dull. I won't be here for very long, though, that's fortunate."

"I—I ride 'most every day," Marian announced diffidently.

"Then you can ride with me. That'll be great! It's stupid riding alone. You used to go out with Mark Wetherell and me, didn't you, years ago? I thought we used to ride together. Or were we only always going to do it—I forget. Anyway, what about to-morrow? Could you come to-morrow?"

She nodded eagerly. "I'd love it! I—I usually ride alone. And as you say it *is* stupid sometimes, although I do love it."

What fun it would be, she thought, to have some one with her. She and Nance had explored most of the roads round about, and many that were not roads, and she liked and was used to riding alone. Nevertheless, there was an excitement in having a companion, some one other than Ted Chamberlayne with whom she rode occasionally—it was thrilling. Aloud she said:

"What time? And—and where shall I meet you?"

"Oh, three o'clock, say." He hesitated. "Shall I stop down at your place for you, or—er—will you meet me somewhere?"

Something told her that she didn't want him to come down to the cottage, or perhaps that he wouldn't want to come. She was angry at herself for feeling so—anything that seemed like disloyalty to her mother and Ted made her ashamed. Nevertheless, she said quickly: "Oh, I'll meet you somewhere."

"Where?"

"Wherever you say."

He smiled again and looked about him.

"Well, what about right here? It's not far from your

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place, is it? And it's out of the way. You won't be bothered by people passing or wondering what you're doing."

There was, where they stood, the start of a small lane leading off from the road, a leafy enclosure.

"I'll wait right there," she said pointing to it.

"Right-o. Well, I guess I'd better be going now. Here, Nero!" He gathered up the reins, lying loosely on the horse's neck, and swung himself into the saddle. "So long, then. See you to-morrow. Don't you forget!"

"No," she shook her head gravely, "I won't forget." She was patting Nero's nose. "Do you know I haven't ridden with anybody—except of course Ted—since Mark Wetherell went away. That was a year after you went. He didn't go to the same school as you, after all, did he?"

"Mark Wetherell? Oh, of course." He was stooping over the horse's neck rearranging the reins. "Good old Mark! I haven't seen him in years. What kind of a chap has he turned into?" There was just a shade of patronage in his tone.

Marian met his eyes calmly. "Don't you know?" she asked gravely.

For a moment Donald failed to meet her eye. Then he laughed frankly.

"Of course I do. The best in the world! And I've seen him since you have, I dare say. Don't know what I wanted to be such an idiot for. Hope we'll all three get together again some day. Well, good-by. Mind you're on time to-morrow."

She watched him ride away between the arching trees down the shadow-patterned road, until a turn shut him off from her view. Then, plucking a wisp of grass from the roadside and drawing it thoughtfully between her lips, she walked on towards Thornton.

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2

He met her on the morrow halfway down the Thornton road as he had promised. He was rather late in coming. She had expected she would have to wait—somehow they had both seemed to take that as a matter of course in planning their rendezvous—but scarcely so long as this.

The wind blew from the sea and Nance, the mare, fidgeted a good deal, lifting her head and scenting the keen salt air with widespread nostrils. She disliked standing still, yet as a rule it took only a touch of Marian's firm little hand to soothe her; but to-day her impatience was proof against all the girl's exhortations. Perhaps Marian's own excitement communicated itself in some occult way to the mare and contributed to her uneasiness. She pirouetted, arching her neck and tossing her head; jangling the bit in her mouth in spite of Marian's efforts to calm her.

But just before Donald appeared, riding nonchalantly, one foot swinging out of his stirrup, she quieted; so that he found Marian sitting motionless, straight and still in her arbour of trees, roofed over like a penthouse—as still and straight as some marble statue in its niche, or like one of the horseguards in front of the Parade in London which he had seen in his travels last summer. He meant to tell her of that later.

At the first signal of command Nance stepped delicately forward, a certain strained nervousness apparent in her demeanour. She walked beside Donald's big black, her eyes rolling, feet lifted high, eyeing her companion askance. She appeared a little timid and distrustful of this new acquaintance. She knew he was not from the home stables.

Marian, too, was very shy. She answered Donald's

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commonplace remarks in monosyllables, her eyes fixed on the road ahead of them, tapping her foot restlessly with her riding crop. She didn't usually carry one, she would have scorned the idea of needing one. She had brought it to-day out of deference to Donald; and she was glad to have it now, since it supplied her with something to do with her hands. So she went on tapping and staring straight before her, and Donald looked at her from time to time, wondering how they were to get along if he couldn't make her say anything.

He did his best to put her at her ease. He was not actually aware that he was endeavouring to do so—he was rather young for such a display of tact—but he felt an immense superiority, and that made him gracious. Himself just past nineteen, he found his companion very immature. She was an amusing little thing with her fair hair hanging so straight down her back, and her big grey eyes which she lifted occasionally in swift glances to his face, and the old-fashioned habit. (She had put on her best and was rather proud of it than otherwise, but she did not tell him this.) He compared her mentally with the girl he had spoken of to her once before, Connie Leveredge, a connection by marriage of his mother's, and was amused at the contrast.

She sat her horse well, though, perhaps even better than Connie did, although Connie was an expert horse-woman. Riding had been one of the most strenuously advertised adjuncts to the curriculum of the very expensive school where Connie had so recently been "finished." She was to "come out" in the fall. The memory of her delicate prettiness made him speak of her now.

"I guess I told you the other day about some friends of mine who are coming down here to see me next week. One of them's an awfully attractive girl. I call her my

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cousin. She is, in a way, a sort of cousin. She's awfully attractive; you'll like her. She rides almost as well as you."

She gave him a quick look of eager thanks. They had taken the road that branched off from the Thornton road, an old, little-used wagon track, and were proceeding along it in the direction of the sea. Already they could smell the pungent odour of the salt marshes, and see the gulls wheeling pensively overhead.

"She's a little older than you," Donald continued. "About my age," he added with a touch of condescension. "And she's keen on society and all that. We're to have a dance for her when she comes—rather a large dance. It's fixed for Friday night of next week, I believe. I never pay much attention to that sort of thing; but there's no end of fuss about it going on at the house."

He looked at her, expecting some comment, but she said nothing. Perhaps she was too much impressed by his air of detachment from the social side of life. It was a pose which he was only just developing. Had she been better acquainted with human nature she would have protested against this neglect, this scorn of convention on his part. As it was she said nothing and he, too, lapsed into silence. The only sounds were the occasional jingling of the bridles and the shuffling pad-pad of the horses' hoofs in the soft sand of the shore road, as they walked slowly towards the beach. Donald was turning something over in his mind. The extreme magnanimity of inviting her to the dance appealed to him irresistibly.

"I say, you'll come to our dance—my dance—won't you?"

Marian blushed fiery red and turned her face away towards the sea. "I—I'd like to, but—but I'm not invited," she stammered.

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Donald laughed. "But you are. I'm inviting you now."

She hesitated. It was difficult to explain.

"Your mother—" she ventured, and stopped.

But Donald was not offended.

"Oh, well, if you're so formal, I'll have mother send you an invitation to-morrow. That's easy enough to get over. The party's for me—for me and my guests, that is. I have whoever I want. You don't suppose I have to ask permission, do you?" He tossed aside any impediment. It was agreeable to give the impression to one so obviously impressed, that one could order what one wished, even from one's parents—that one had only to ask for things.

And Marian was impressed, even while she tried to formulate the proper course for herself. After all, she had never been to a party—not a real party such as this would be.

"You'll come then?" He tried to see her face but she kept it resolutely turned away. "Eh? Give me an answer. You'll come, won't you?"

"Yes, if you want me; and—and if mother will let me."

Donald smiled. At nineteen it seemed absurd to him, the idea of asking permission for such a thing. But after all she was only a child. He felt a sort of compassionate pity for her youth and innocence.

"I hope you can come," he said, and let it go at that.

They had taken the road which leads you straight down to Hodder's Beach, the flat hard beach where you can canter without sinking in. Already Donald's big black was stumbling among the loose stones, rolled down from the adjacent cliffs, that have to be traversed before the beach itself is reached. Nance never stumbled; she had

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been over these rocks too often. She picked her way delicately and deliberately with a sage discretion.

They had reached the flat expanse of Hodder's Beach now. The wind blew inland from the sea, strong and cool, with a hint of spray in their faces. The little waves broke well out and came tumbling in in serried rows of foam, not the thunderous rollers of further down the coast, where the tall cliffs stand defiant, but neat, flat little waves, like ripples blown up and grown suddenly big, that rushed with soft impetuosity up the beach and left a pinkish trail behind them as they ran back to join their fellows.

Nance and the black picked their way solemnly along the hard sands that deadened their hoof beats, the mare pretending once or twice, as was her wont, to shy at a stray wreath of seaweed lying loosely above the water line. Their riders appeared content to go slowly; but Nance, with expectant ears, waited the signal to canter. She knew well what the beach was for.

But Donald and Marian still dallied. Beyond them were the long, blue-grey billows, ahead of them the flat, hard sands stretching a smooth roadbed for a mile or more before it was lost again in the sloping cliffs that rose at the farther end. Far up the beach they could see the sunlight flashing on the old pavillion, "Hodder's Casino," a dilapidated "pleasure palace" of other days, disused and boarded up now, but once the scene of much innocent gaiety. It stood outlined against the yellow sands and the deep blue sky, its garish white ugliness transformed at this distance to the sparkling turrets and minarets of some eastern mosque or Aladdin's palace of marble. Marian's eyes were fixed on the shining white splendour. "Let's canter," she suggested.

"Right-o!" Donald lifted the reins on his horse's neck.

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Nance needed no command. With a brave toss of her head she sprang forward. In an instant she was in the black's stride and they were off!

Away they dashed, a flash of black and brown that raced against the blue. The sand, hard as a roadbed, crunched underfoot; the salt wind bit at their lips and blew Marian's hair back till it streamed behind her in a long golden wave. Faster and faster they galloped, the mare eager to prove her mettle against the black's. Marian was in a seventh heaven of delight. This was life to her; this eager pulsing joy. The mad, glad wind sang in her ears, loosened a strand of the fair hair and sent it whipping across her cheeks. She tossed it away and looked back at Donald, laughing.

Her hat slipped back. It bothered her and she had to hold it on with one hand. In a breathless moment between the thudding of the hoofs Donald shouted to her: "Why don't you take it off?" The wind rushing by tore the words from his lips, but she heard and did as he bade her, slipping the elastic over her arm and letting the hat dangle, but they neither of them paused in the mad race onward.

Faster and faster, with thudding hoofs and tightened reins, side by side the horses sped along the sands, the black's hoofs sending an occasional pebble scattering, the mare racing gallantly with outstretched neck and wide-spread nostrils and sidelong glances at her companion. Faster and faster, with the wind in their faces and the level sunlight on the waves flashing.

Marian leaned well forward over the mare's neck. Her pulses were pounding and the wind singing in her ears. A flock of killdeers rose suddenly at their approach and flew before them along the shore, crossing and recrossing their path with the sun glinting on their wings as they

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turned, all together, in mid-flight; then out to sea again with their platoon formation never broken.

Faster and faster, with the sunlight striking sparks of fire from the rushing foam of the breakers, and the red line of cliffs ahead; faster and faster till the whole world appeared to be in flight. And from over the water, the sanderlings turned and came back, and rose and followed after, and raced them along the thunderous beach, till the mare began to pant softly, and the big black's hoof beats slowed and faltered.

Marian drew Nance in quickly, and watched the swift unresting flight of the birds as they skimmed outward over the curling crests of the waves, and out, still out, beyond, her eyes marking their track, her unnamed joyous thoughts flying with them.

Donald pulled in his horse further on, wheeled, and came back to her side.

"I say, you stopped rather suddenly then. What happened?"

"Nothing. I wanted to watch those sandpipers, that was all."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. They looked so free, flying like that wherever they liked."

He shook his head. "You're a funny kid! You've got the weirdest ideas. But as a matter of fact, you're all wrong—about those birds, I mean. They're not free at all. Didn't you notice? Not one of them got out of position. They do just as their leader tells them to. Frightfully hidebound things they are really, when they fly in flocks like that."

"I don't care." She was still gazing wistfully out to sea whither the glittering birds had vanished. "I like them. I'd like to fly like that."

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Regretfully she patted Nance's neck as a signal to proceed. Quietly now they walked the rest of the way along the sands until they reached the place where the sharp cliffs come down into the sea and end the beach.

"We'll have to turn here and canter back, shan't we?" he asked.

"We could, but it's rather far. There's a path up here we can take over the cliffs and along the dunes. It's a little rough, the going, at first, but it runs into a regular road at the top of the cliff. Shall we try it?" He nodded assent.

"All right. I'll go ahead and show you the path."

She led the way up the steep, narrow incline. He watched the slender line of her back as she leaned well forward over Nance's neck. The mare scrambled cleverly up; the big black followed more clumsily. At the top the path ran a little way along the edge of the cliff before it turned inland, skirting the soft outlines of the sand dunes, beyond which lay the salt marshes, to join the narrow rutted road that led back towards Whitridge.

They paused for a moment at the top of the cliff to watch the sea transfused to a soft green against the pink edge of the moist sand where the water had run back. Out beyond the white ruffles of the breakers it was a deep, mysterious, turquoise, deepening gradually to tender all-enveloping azure. Then they turned, trotted gaily past the long dunes lying lustreless in soft grey heaps, where the shadows were changing from brown to violet, and on, over the clattering wooden bridge and down the long road that wound, first in the direction of Tonomet, and then back towards home.

They took this remaining portion of the ride almost in complete silence and rather slowly. There was one breathless canter along the level stretch back of the coast-

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guards' cottages; but their conversation was desultory and a kind of lassitude, a reaction, perhaps, from the wild joy of that first canter down on Hodder's Beach, took hold of their limbs and filled them with a pleasurable feeling of fatigue.

Their way now, coming from this direction, led past the Pritchards' front gate, and it was there she said good-bye to him, slipping down from her saddle and opening the driveway gate for herself before Donald had noticed that, for some reason, it happened to be closed.

Funny kid! he thought to himself again, not to have waited for him to do it for her. Nevertheless, he leaned out of his saddle.

"I say, you'll ride to-morrow again? No, not to-morrow, either, I can't. I've got to go to Thornton with my mother. I've promised her. The day after then. Will that do?"

"All right," she said, "the day after."

She led Nance through the gate and closed it after her. Donald watched until she disappeared around the turn of the drive. Then he rode slowly back to the Hall.

He thought of Marian in an odd, complex way mixed in with reminiscences of his early youth and the good times he and Mark and she had had together. He had forgotten all about her and pretty much about Mark while he was away. He had none of that sentimentality which frequently attacks young people in regard to the days of their youth, that half-melancholy recollection of bygone pleasures. He had early mastered the art of living solely in the present. He discounted, therefore, any sentimental attraction which Marian might have for him because of their association in the past.

He had, moreover, no intention of thinking of her in-

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dividually as anything that mattered. He was at an age that scorns a girl of hers, and yet, in a way, she interested him. She was a funny kid; so serious and so—he couldn't quite put his finger on it or give it a name, this elusive quality in her which had impressed him—a sort of aloofness, like a mantle of virginal splendour wrapping her about; it had undoubtedly impressed him and, in spite of himself, somewhat awed him. He was surprised. Yes, she was a funny kid! He shook his head, rode up to the door of the Hall and promptly forgot all about her.

3

The rides in the following week were many. On the day before Donald's friends were expected down for the house party, they rode in the afternoon as usual.

It was hot, very hot. The road towards Tonomet stretched before them, a white ribbon of blazing light in which the horses' hoofs appeared to sink fetlock deep in the dust. They rode along in silence for some distance.

"Shall we strike down to the shore road?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's too hot to canter. Let's go around by way of Lone Tree Hill and back by the Thornton road."

He nodded. "Right-o! I dare say if there's any breeze at all it will be up there."

They moved on, the cloud of dust raised by Nance's and the black's hoofs hanging motionless, a thick white barrier behind them. It settled on Donald's shining boots and dulled the russet brown of Marian's putties. Nance tossed her head frequently, a wary, distrustful movement, and now and then a little apprehensive shiver shook her.

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They wound up past the crest of the hill and down again. The breeze was nowhere to be found. Once or twice they trotted, but there was no cantering to-day. "Oh, it's much too hot," Marian had objected when, on the upward slope of the hill, Donald suggested it.

The heat persisted. The sky, a pinkish blue, hung heavy above them with new, bellying masses of white cloud.

"Look at those thunderheads," Donald said musingly. "Did you ever see such white puffy ones? That one over there looks just like a mushroom."

Marian did not answer, but Nance glanced nervously about, and picked her way more delicately along the dusty road.

"I hope it's not going to rain," Donald continued, "and spoil our ride. This is our last ride together. My friends come to-morrow, you know."

He spoke carelessly. There seemed to him nothing incongruous in thus announcing to her her prospective retirement.

It was some time before Marian spoke, so long that Donald had forgotten the connection.

"It's been fun, though, hasn't it?"

"What has?"

"Our riding together."

He agreed absently, watching the low bushes along the way, their heads heavy with the thick white dust, and the goldenrod in the fields beyond, full blossomed, fat and yellow, drooping under their golden weight.

A pair of crows flapped cawing over their heads to a bit of woods beyond the fields. In a long patch of pasture land, cows nibbled negligently, a single one here and there, others crouched together in huddled groups under the shade trees. August, rich and luxuriant, sum-

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mer in her fullness, heavy with foliage, murmurous with insect life, fertile in harvest, replete, like a woman in the plenilune of love.

The grass at the side of the road began to stir faintly, and commotion amongst the leaves of a nearby group of trees showed the wind rising; but no sound reached them as yet, although the towering white clouds were being followed in a swift race across the sky by blacker ones, heavy with portent. A roll of muttered thunder greeted their ears.

Marian held out her hand. "Look," she said, "it's beginning to rain."

Donald pulled in his horse. "I say, it surely is!"

He looked around him doubtfully at the swaying branches of the trees and the thickening heavens.

"And it's going to rain harder yet before it's through! Shall we turn back?" He looked over his shoulder down the long, dusty road. "Still, that's about as far as to go ahead."

"We oughtn't to have come so far," remarked Marian calmly, without regret. Donald made no answer.

"Let's ride on," he suggested. "We're sure to find a barn, or farmhouse, or something along the road if it rains too hard."

They moved forward at a foot pace. The rain sprinkled gently, falling through the trees with a soft rustle. The road, a narrow one, afforded them sufficient protection for the moment; but after a while the drops began to penetrate their shelter, and an open space of road, which they covered at a quick trot, nevertheless showed them the inadvisability of continuing thus. Once more Donald drew rein and looked about him.

"I say, we can't stay out in this. It's going to rain pitchforks in a moment. Look at those black clouds: I

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don't think I ever saw worse ones. Let's turn in here and see if we can't find some shelter."

He wheeled his horse as he spoke, into a narrow lane, dusky and overgrown with arching boughs under which they had to stoop in order to pass. The sweet scent of newly fallen rain on leaves and moist earth came to them as the horses plunged into the enclosure.

"It's like the woods surrounding the Sleeping Beauty's castle!" Marian declared delightedly.

Even wet and dripping the place had a romantic charm; but Donald was too sophisticated for such fancies.

"I say, I'm getting wetter and wetter. These damned trees leak like a sieve. Oh, Jimminy! there goes a drop right down my neck! I say, there *must* be something, some place to stop. Are you getting very wet? If we *can't* find a place you must take my coat."

The rain was coming down in deadly earnest now; it spat with a vicious fury. The scent of the wet woodland mingled with the odour given off from the steaming horses and the smell of wet leather. Donald rode ahead. The lane widened somewhat.

"Ah, here we are at last!"

They had come in sight of shelter. It was an old tumble-down shed or barn, unused, apparently, for the crumbled foundations of a house which had fallen in ruins showed near by, and all was overgrown with vines and bore the pathetic look of the deserted homestead.

The barn itself, although rather dilapidated and open back and front, was clean and empty. They rode the horses inside and tethered them at the far side. They stood for a while watching the downpour from the cool shelter of the shed.

"It looks like a solid sheet of silver and—and it sings, doesn't it? As if it enjoyed coming down."

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"You ought to see it rain in the tropics," he told her. "There it comes down in bucketfuls, oh rather! You've no idea how it can rain. And the rivers get full all of a sudden, rivers where there isn't any water half of the year."

They moved back a little to keep out of the wet, for the wind was shifting a bit. The musty inside of the shed smelled of hay and harness and the faint pervasive sweetness of stored apples. The rain slid along the outer edges of the barn and poured from the gables. An upper story, roofed over, muffled the beating of the storm above their heads; but it hissed softly in the open space before them. They moved farther and farther back, but the rain kept beating in.

"I'm going to shut those doors," Donald announced.

"What's the use?" she laughed. "The back's all open, anyway."

"Yes, but the wind's not from that direction."

"Oh, I wouldn't close them," she said again. "It's pretty watching the rain, and cooler. How much cooler it's got, do you notice? It won't hurt us to get a little damp."

Nevertheless, he pushed the sagging doors to. They would not quite shut, but left an opening perhaps a foot wide through which the storm sent an occasional spurt of rain. Donald found an old tumble-down bench tucked away in one corner. He dragged it out and dusted it off, and they sat on it, side by side, facing the opening and watching the heavy beat of drops on the floor of the shed and the intermittent flashes of lightning. Now and then a distant boom of thunder rumbled. In her corner of the barn Nance tossed her head and whinnied softly.

"I say, you know, this is rather jolly." He sat quite

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close to her on the narrow bench in the warm half-darkness of the barn's interior. "I say, I don't care if it doesn't let up for another hour; should you?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose so. Only I don't want mother to worry."

"Oh, she won't worry, will she?" he said lightly. "She knows you wouldn't be such a fool as to sit out in all this." He indicated the still pouring rain.

"No, I suppose not."

"Besides, she knows you're with me."

They were silent for quite a while after that. Outside, the rain, past its first tumultuous anger, gradually lessened. They heard the muffled, ghostly tapping on the roof above them growing fainter and fainter. The silver shower in the doorway no longer flooded the floor. One narrow stream of water collected back of the opening and ran a little way tentatively towards them, stopped, and eddied around a stray bit of straw.

He seemed acutely conscious of her beside him on the narrow bench. He put out a tentative arm behind her back.

"I say, you know, we're all alone here."

He looked at her searchingly, enquiringly. She turned to him, but all he could make out in the soft darkness was a slightly puzzled expression, as if she wanted to understand but didn't.

"There's no one to see—don't you think we might—" he paused.

"What?" she asked simply.

Donald hesitated. And again he was aware of that cloak of natural simplicity, of virginal splendour, that aloofness; and his courage failed him.

"Oh, nothing," he said huskily; and dropped his arm to the bench again.

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Marian continued to stare at him with wide-eyed questioning; but as he made no further effort to elucidate his meaning, she turned from him at last.

"Oh, look! A rainbow!"

A glimpse of it could be had through the narrow opening. They hurried to the door and pushed it wide. The rain was still falling, a fine gentle drizzle, but the sun had already broken through the clouds; for up from the clump of trees that masked the entrance to the lane there stretched, in a wide shimmering arc, a perfect rainbow in serried bands of colour. Tenuous and evanescent it hung there, quivering, sparkling in the rain-washed light, delicate as the ether from which it was born, mysteriously beautiful.

"Oh, how lovely!" Marian caught her breath as she stood by Donald's side in the doorway.

"Did you ever see a more perfect circle—only it isn't a circle, is it? Or is it? It goes almost as far as we can see. Do you suppose it really does go right on around?"

She laughed as she spoke; but Donald was gazing thoughtfully at the slender prism in the sky.

"They say, you know, that there's a pot of gold buried at the foot of the rainbow."

"Real gold?"

"Perhaps. I suppose it depends on what you're looking for. If you want gold it might be that, or it might, you see, mean happiness, or contentment or—or love, any of those things people are always searching for."

"Does every one search for something? Do you?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't travel that far for it whatever it was."

He turned back carelessly into the barn as he spoke; nevertheless, his words thrilled her. She stood still where

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he had left her staring at the slowly fading colours of the rainbow. His remarks about the old legend had been simple enough, there was nothing very remarkable either of poetry or romance in them, yet his words seemed to have opened up new worlds to her. She sensed suddenly the half painful, delicious savour of life, the sense of something wonderful to come, of the mystery and adventure wrapped up in the future. It was as if some one had opened the door of romance before her; and she knew that henceforth she would see life with different eyes. Pale, wistful, half-conscious dreams they were, such as come to all maidenhood, yet for Marian, to be forever indissolubly associated with that shimmering arc of colour in the milk-white sky.

The rainbow had not even yet quite faded when they led the horses out from the deserted barn. To the memory of its glory they mounted and rode slowly home.

4

It was almost dark when Marian reached home. Lights were beginning to twinkle in the Whitridge streets, and from far down the road she caught the gleam of a lamp in the cottage parlour. Ted Chamberlayne was out in the stable yard with a lantern waiting for her when she rode in. He helped her down from her horse, and loosened Nance's saddle girths before leading her into the stable.

Marian staggered a bit as her feet touched the ground. She was stiff from the long ride.

"Your mother's inside," said Ted without looking at her. "She's kept supper hot for you. You're late. Better go in. I'll bed down the mare."

Without replying, Marian turned and entered the house. The light in the sitting room made her blink after the thick darkness outside. She stood in the doorway and

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regarded her mother who turned startled eyes on her, disapproving eyes, vaguely inimical.

"Where've you been?" Her voice, high-pitched as usual, held a note of irritation.

"Riding with Donald Callender. We went down the road past Lone Tree Hill and we got caught in the rain and had to stop in a barn until it was over. I'm sorry to be late."

Her mother continued to look annoyed. There was a worried line between her high-arched eyebrows as if at some petty vexation. The rôle of preceptor was always difficult for her.

"All the same you've no business to be so late. You must have gone dreadfully far. And, anyway, I'm not sure that I like your riding around the country like this with young Callender. They say down in the village that he's rather wild at college—not turning out any too well. I don't know. I suppose it's all right, but I don't like it—you're riding all over the country and coming in late like this."

"I won't be doing it any more," Marian answered wearily. "His friends are coming to-morrow."

Her mother did not respond to this; and Marian turned and went out into the kitchen.

"You'll find the vegetables in the oven and the cold meat's on the table," her mother called after her.

CHAPTER V

I

IT was decided that she should go to the dance after all. After all, in spite of Ted's objections.

The invitation arrived in due form, a prettily worded formal note addressed to Miss Marian Pritchard:

MRS. PETER CALLENDER
*requests the pleasure of Miss Pritchard's
company on Friday evening,*

etc.—there seemed to be no fault to be found on the score of convention and yet Ted appeared dissatisfied.

"I don't see why you let her go," he said surlily to Elaine.

Elaine Pritchard sat frowning and biting her lips, with the letter held between her fingers. She was desperately undetermined about it. Marian had had no chance for any social life heretofore—of course, she was absurdly young for anything of the sort, but yet, when the chance did offer, was she, Elaine, justified in refusing her permission? Their circumstances were so peculiar— She looked up into Ted's handsome, frowning face.

"It's a nicely enough worded note, Ted—and the child might enjoy the party."

"It isn't the right sort of note, anyway, and you know it," Ted rejoined. "Why didn't she write to you and

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ask if Marian might come. That would be the decent way to do. She's only a child, you know."

"Yes, I know. That's the way I should have done it, of course. Still, there is a difference, I suppose. Anyway, it's civil enough—the note." She looked in a perplexed way, and a trifle timidly at Ted's scowling eyes and the grim lines of obstinacy about his mouth. "And I was only thinking of Marian. She'd enjoy it. She doesn't have a great deal of fun, you know."

"Nevertheless, I'd keep her home." Ted was firm in his opinion. "There's time enough for that sort of thing later."

Marian who had kept silent during this discussion, now spoke:

"But I'd like to go, Ted. And Donald asked me himself a long time ago. Truly he did."

Ted stared at her in his blank way for a moment; then rose with a sort of grunt.

"Oh, well, it's your own affair. Suit yourself. I don't suppose it matters much one way or the other."

He went out grumpily; he had not forgotten that little episode with Donald and the dogs on the Thornton Road. But as Elaine knew, he never interfered in her management of the child. She sat for some time after he had left the room, silent, with the note still in her hand and tapping her teeth with it pensively from time to time. In the end she decided that Marian should go.

2

Marian had been full of anticipation before the event. It was her first party, the only party she had ever yet been invited to. During the few days before it her heart was in a delicious flutter of excitement and eagerness. When the actual evening came, however, her spirits suf-

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ferred a reaction. It seemed to her terrible that she should have to go alone. Also, she knew she would be younger than most of the guests, and youth is, at times, a great handicap. In spite of the excitement of preparation she was distinctly nervous.

Ted walked as far as the entrance to the Callender's drive with her. As she fluttered along by his side she hoped he didn't know the shrinking feeling she was experiencing.

She held her head high and walked carefully, so as not to spoil her low-heeled black patent-leather pumps nor muss the white lawn dress (her best) which her mother had washed and ironed so carefully for this occasion.

She looked very pretty—her mother had said that and Ted had agreed—in the simple white frock, with her fair hair looped up in a knot at the back of her head. It was the first time she had worn it that way and the strangeness of the coiffure added to her anxiety—as if she missed the friendly soft locks over her shoulders.

Her dress had quite satisfied her when she put it on, and when she was standing in the little sitting room of the cottage being admired by Ted and her mother, but on the way to the Hall doubts began to assail her. Was it long enough? Was it short enough? Was it too high in the neck? Did it stand out properly? Was it, indeed, altogether too simple? Most of the girls, she felt sure, would be in satin or silk. And oughtn't her shoes to be white?

She walked along beside Ted, full of a seething disquietude. She was sure she was too early. That was a possible *contretemps* which had haunted her imagination ever since the invitation had come and they had decided to let her go—the fear that she would arrive too

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early. Her mother had assured her when she left the cottage that she wouldn't, that she would be just in time; but, after all, *did* her mother know about these things? She used to go to parties herself, it was true, but that was a long while back. Perhaps people didn't go so early now. She was sure she had heard that somewhere—that people went to parties much later now. And no one had yet passed them going. How was one to tell?

She glanced at Ted striding along so unconcernedly. It struck her as a little callous, this indifference of his to the gravity of the situation. He was whistling softly to himself under his breath, his lips pursed up. Her own mouth felt dry and hard and the palms of her hands were quite wet.

Should she ask Ted about the time? Whether it wasn't too early? No, he wouldn't know about that. If necessary she could dawdle on the way up the drive after he had left her.

After he had left her! After he had left her! Terrible words! She would have to walk all alone up the drive; and all alone through the big front door; and all alone into a big room! Oh, it was terrible, terrible! She wished now that they hadn't let her come; wished desperately that they had kept her home. They had reached the entrance to the drive. . . .

Ted left her with a nonchalance that seemed to her positively hateful.

"Well, so long!" he said. "Have a good time. I'll be here at the gate waiting for you at half-past eleven. You won't mind coming that far—from the house here—alone?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, good luck!" Ted turned to leave.

"Oh, Ted!"

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He came back.

"But, Ted, how am I to know the time?"

The question was, in truth, only a desperate little strategy to keep him with her a moment longer. What remained of her courage was fast oozing away.

But Ted didn't understand.

"Oh, there's sure to be a clock somewhere about. Or if there isn't, you can ask some one."

"Oh."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She stood between the pillars of the entrance staring after him.

A little way off, Ted turned again and called back to her:

"Don't have such a good time that you forget to come home," he said with an attempt at jocularly. His words were but a hollow mockery to the frightened child.

She had dreaded the time when he would leave her to go the rest of the way alone. Now she realised that she had only half imagined the horror of it. She wanted most awfully to run after his retreating figure; to take his hand; to implore him to take her home again! She wanted most amazingly to do this, yet something deterred her—a kind of stubborn pride. She had wanted to come—she had told them she wanted to come—

A carriage turning in at the drive forced her to draw back suddenly, out of the way, and stopped her reverie. She saw three or four young men and girls in the back, evidently party bent. They all seemed very happy and gay, and looked at her a trifle curiously, she fancied, as if wondering what she was doing there.

They were gone in a moment, bowling swiftly up the drive. It was no one she knew; they hadn't looked at

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her particularly kindly, but their presence fortified her with the assurance that she wouldn't be the first one there. She gave one last despairing glance after Ted's rapidly disappearing figure. It seemed to her that he was indifferent. What he was really saying to himself was: "Poor little kid! In a blue funk and too game to say so! God knows how they'll treat her up there!"

Having watched Ted out of sight, Marian walked rapidly up the drive with her hands tight clenched. No need to dawdle, after all, since those others had gone in ahead of her. And now a second and a third carriage passed her. People seemed to look out of them at her curiously, too. Perhaps she ought not to be on foot at all. She hurried on, not wishing to be seen by any one else. It would appear that one ought to go to a party in bunches; no one else was alone like this. They stared at her, these others, and from one carriage a burst of laughter just after they had passed her floated back to her and brought the colour to her cheeks. It had, probably, nothing to do with her—they were a gay little party of close friends inside—but she imagined it did and suffered accordingly. But it also woke that resolute little determination in her. No turning back now! She set her chin firmly and proceeded.

She tried to reassure herself. After all, she had been properly invited. It wasn't as if she were pushing in where she wasn't wanted. Donald had wanted her—he had said so. And she looked very nice. Her mother and Ted had both remarked upon that. She was evidently arriving at the proper time.

And yet, as she came within sight of the big front door, a feeling almost of suffocation overcame her; followed by one of bleak desolation as the door was opened for her, and she realised that now, at any rate, it was

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too late to retreat. If she only had some one there to go in with her it might not be so dreadful.

"Upstairs to your right, please."

In a sort of trance, through which she seemed acutely self-conscious, she crossed the hall, her low-heeled patent-leather pumps sounding in her ears like hobnailed boots on the polished floor. There were only a few persons in the hall but they all appeared to cease talking and look at her. She felt, uncomfortably, a dozen pairs of eyes upon her.

Resolutely she mounted the stairs, and started blindly into a room on the left.

"No, no, miss, in here, if you please!"

She drew back, mortified, covered with a deep humiliation. She had tried to walk into the room set apart for the men to take off their hats and coats in. What a dreadful blunder!

She had nothing to leave in the dressing room save a light scarf which she had worn about her shoulders, and which her mother had advised her to keep with her in the dance room in case she should get overheated with dancing, and cool too quickly. She remembered that now; but she had come upstairs and she felt that something had to be left there in the dressing room. She unwound the scarf from her shoulders; and as the maid didn't appear anxious to take it from her, laid it herself upon the bed.

She didn't know what to do next. There was a group of girls over by the dressing table completely monopolizing the mirror. They showed no disposition to make room for her there, so she stood uncertainly where she was between the bed and the door.

"Can I do anything for you, miss?" the maid asked.

Marian shook her head and flushed. She was afraid

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to speak. And she saw the woman smile. It was only because she appeared so immature and frightened; but the girl did not understand. That covert smile was like a whiplash across her face. She turned abruptly and left the room without so much as a glance in the mirror.

The maid followed her to the door, and she felt the woman's eyes on her back all the way as she clumped down the stairs.

To her right or the left now? Her heart was beating so hard she thought it must show from the outside. If only she could find Donald; but Donald was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, in the room to the right which she presently entered, she saw a number of people, all very well dressed, and chatting amiably; but there were none whom she knew. One knot, composed of Donald's mother and three or four remarkably attractive girls, appeared to be the centre of interest.

Marian stood dumbly in the doorway. She knew that she must go up to them and speak to them, but she was waiting in a vain hope of acquiring a little more courage.

At length, affecting a calm which she was very far from feeling, she took a step towards them. She had only just started when a group of men and girls brushed by her, one man pushing her aside with a careless, "Oh, pardon!" They pressed ahead of her up to the receiving line. Marian waited a second; then followed meekly in their wake.

She managed to reach Mrs. Callender's side, and put out a hesitating hand. Mrs. Callender raised a jewelled lorgnette enquiringly; Marian blushed furiously.

"I'm Marian Pritchard," she said bluntly. Her own voice sounded terribly coarse and brusque in her ears.

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Ought she to have waited—not announced herself like that? She was sure Mrs. Callender really knew her. That raising of the jewelled lorgnette was only manner; she should have waited.

Mrs. Callender smiled ever so slightly, an irritating smile.

“Oh, yes,” she said, “so good of you to come so early.”

She *was* early then, after all!

All her former fears returned tenfold. Perhaps all these people here were special friends asked particularly to come early to be there when the other guests arrived. And Donald was nowhere to be seen. He surely would have been there if she had not come before she was expected. Her last remaining pleasure in the party fled precipitately. She fell back from Mrs. Callender’s presence, drooping miserably.

The latter was already shaking hands with some new arrivals and introducing them down the line—she had made no attempt to do this favour for Marian. The child retired to a corner and studied the faces of these visiting girls whom she was not asked to meet. That one just next to Mrs. Callender, the one with the dark hair so beautifully curled, and the pretty red mouth, must be Connie Leveredge, the almost-cousin whom Donald had spoken of as coming. Marian recognised her instantly from Donald’s description.

Slender and petite—she was not over five feet—Connie Leveredge displayed in her manner and appearance all the assurance and sophistication that Marian lacked. She was unusually pretty, not beautiful, but wonderfully well gotten up—and charming in a bright, vivacious way. She was clever in conversation as well as looks, altogether a rather unusual girl, a radiant, sparkling, *spirit-*

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uelle little beauty. Marian watched her chatting and laughing with an admiring wonder entirely untempered with envy. She was frankly awed. It must be wonderful to be like that!

Connie had very small white teeth which she showed constantly as she parted her small red lips and gave her merry, brittle laugh, that was somehow contagious without being really mirthful. She greeted all Donald's guests, especially the young men, as if they were old friends; she seemed to find some sort of joke or merry flippancy to exchange with each one of them as, one after another, they crowded around her begging her to promise them dances a little later.

She was very beautifully dressed, Marian noticed; in white, too, but such different white from Marian's; white that was all shiny and sparkling as she turned and twisted and laughed. The other girls who were evidently visiting in the house, too, appeared popular, as well, but Connie easily outshone them. They were like a bevy of bridesmaids about a bride; Connie was so easily the centre of any group which held her.

There entered, presently, people from Thornton and a few who lived on its outskirts, practically in Whitridge, people whom Marian knew. One a group of several girls with whom Marian had been at school. She knew them quite well and spoke to them. They all gave her keen looks and nodded indifferently; and at once became absorbed in one another. She had thought of joining them, but now she hesitated. The girls appeared oblivious of her intention and she was too proud and too sensitive to do more to claim their attention.

They were not unkind, could she but have known it, but they were girls who had come by themselves, without an escort; and they knew that later, when the dancing

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began, they would have to look out for themselves. They couldn't afford to attach to themselves, perhaps permanently, a girl so obviously destined to "sit out" as that little Pritchard girl. . . . So they turned their backs on her and talked animatedly to one another, meanwhile following the progress around the room of possible dancing prospects out of the tails of their eyes. They were suffering nervous apprehensions as well as Marian, only they hid it better—they were more accustomed to this variety of torture, could even find in it a sort of painful adventure. They watched the young men moving about the room, covertly, fearfully, and yet casually, hoping passionately that this one or that one wouldn't stop by so and so, but come on to them, and breaking out into brittle chatter as soon as the destined prey approached within hail, seeking desperately, by earnest, devoted conversation to prevent his leaving their sides again before the music began. So of course they could not see little Marian. She drifted desolately by them and took up her lonely stand in the far corner of the room.

She was sure that Donald would come to her if he were aware of her plight, or even Colonel Callender who was in the farther room heatedly discussing politics with one of the older men and a few hangers-on, callow youths who hoped thus, by listening to and appearing to join in the conversation of the elders, to give an impression of years and sagacity. But Donald was nowhere to be seen and Colonel Callender never once looked in her direction.

Yet she felt that others did. They looked at her curiously, amusedly, satirically—except those who pointedly ignored her. It was terrible! Her cheeks were burning. She stood in her corner with her head held high, her little chin raised defiantly for all the pain within

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her, clutching with desperate, hot hands the little nosegay which Ted had gathered for her after supper—so it would keep fresh. Already her frock felt crumpled, even her pleasure in the crisp white muslin was evaporating—there were so many handsomer dresses there; and she was certain now that she ought to have had white shoes—every one appeared to look at her shoes.

More people entered whom she knew slightly, but they passed her by. She could not but admire the light assurance with which they came into the room. One was a boy with whom she had ridden when her mother was teaching him—a stupid boy who fell off his horse endlessly. He stared at her blankly but did not speak.

She moved restlessly to the opposite side of the room. In her nervousness it seemed to her that, wherever she went, groups dispersed at her coming; she felt her lips trembling. She wanted desperately to go away somewhere to cry, but there seemed no place to go. How terrible if she were to burst out crying here. What would they all think? She thought wildly of running upstairs again after her scarf and fleeing the house; but if she did that she must needs face the impudently enquiring gaze of that horrid maid up above. She would be obliged to make explanations; what excuse could she give? No, it was not possible. She must just stick it out here.

So she stood there in her solitary corner; and gradually a new terror came to her. She saw the orchestra getting their instruments ready. The music would play presently and every one would dance. She glanced fearfully around the room. Yes, they all seemed to have partners and every one to know every one else. Yes, there was no help for it. Presently the music would begin to play and every one would dance—every one

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but her! She would be left standing like this in the centre of the floor and no one would ask her to dance; no one would ask her all evening! She would just stand there and stand there and every one would dance by and look at her. Oh, it was terrible! Oh, why had she come? Why hadn't she remained at home with her mother and Ted? Why had she ever fancied she would enjoy it! Ted had been right; they oughtn't to have let her come!

The orchestra was tuning up. They were going to begin now. It was coming—the time when every one would begin to dance and leave her like this—like a mariner marooned on a desert island.

She glanced at Mrs. Callender. No help from her. Marian remained as remotely apart from her hostess's notice as if the girl were in truth as invisible as she longed to be.

There was a sudden flurry of trumpets, a signal to commence by the orchestra; and Donald came in suddenly, laughing, half a dozen young men at his heels; they were all laughing. Still laughing he walked straight up to Connie and took her hand without any preliminary ceremony; led her out on the floor. The drums crashed; they were off.

As her prescience had warned her Marian was left standing alone at one side of the room. With the first notes of the music she had sidled into a chair. One brief hope she had had died at its birth. The boy with whom she had occasionally ridden came to the doorway, looked in, turned and went out.

Around and around the dancers whirled in never-ending eddies past her place of mute shame. She saw that Mrs. Callender and one or two older women, mothers or chaperones, had taken seats along the wall opposite

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her; but they appeared completely engrossed in their conversation and gave her no invitation to join them. A group of young men, dancing men all of them, who had been too negligent or too dilatory to secure for themselves the partners they desired, hung about in the doorway talking in whispers, discussing the relative merits of the guests, perhaps, and occasionally breaking out in a raucous laugh at some sally of one of their number. They appeared sublimely unconscious of Marian sitting, a pathetic little figure in her rapidly wilting white muslin, just beyond them.

Around and around the dancers whirled in a seemingly never ending chain. She saw Donald and Connie pass her now and again. Connie's head was thrown back; her cheeks were flushed and she looked amazingly pretty. Donald did not appear to see Marian at all.

Through three dances of white hot shame she sat there. Mrs. Callender and the women with her had moved into the next room; but still Marian remained in her place, her chin held high, her lips pressed tightly together to hide their trembling, and the little bouquet of flowers wilting in her hands. Three dances had passed, three intolerable times the music had played and people had risen from beside her, joined their partners and left her alone. It was just after the third dance that rescue came to her.

It came in no more romantic guise than Colonel Callender himself who entered the room just as the music stopped playing and crossed at once to her side.

She rose timidly to greet him, and in spite of herself the tears came into her eyes, so grateful was she for this attention. He talked to her in his bluff, hearty fashion, he enfolded her in the protecting ægis of his benevolence, he shed about her the feeling of security, of welcome;

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yet all the time she knew that the music would begin again and she ought to have a partner. It would be so dreadful for him to have to go on and on talking with her.

Incredibly soon the music began again and Colonel Callender left her side for a moment. She saw him go up to one of the unattached men standing in the doorway and address him. "Tenniel," she heard him say, and a whisper followed. She knew what it was; he was asking the young man to dance with her!

A hot blush of shame suffused her cheeks, and she thought obstinately of refusing the young man. She needn't have troubled to make such a resolve; Tenniel refused for her.

"Sorry, Colonel," he said, needlessly loud, "but I've this dance engaged."

Colonel Callender turned and she saw him address another, and the boy addressed shake his head; the group rapidly dispersed. The Colonel approached another.

Oh, if only he wouldn't! If only there were some way to stop him! Such charity was worse than sitting alone. She *must* stop him!

She started blindly across the room, almost colliding with a revolving couple; she drew back suddenly and stumbled over a chair, sending it spinning along the polished floor. She recovered herself to find Colonel Callender standing before her, his face rather red. He paused before her and bowed low, a formal, old-fashioned bow.

"Will you be so good as to favour me with this dance? It's a waltz, you see. Sorry I'm not up to these new-fangled dances; but I think I can waltz. I used to, years ago."

They swung out into the tide of dancers. The Colonel

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danced badly; hopping grotesquely, bumping into couples, colliding with the furniture and occasionally treading on her toes; yet in the protecting haven of his arms Marian experienced the first bit of pleasure she had had that evening, the first bit of comfort even. She would not have cared if he had trampled her to atoms; it was such a blessed respite from the bleak wretchedness of those first dances.

The music stopped, and Colonel Callender stood still in the centre of the floor, puffing rather loudly and wiping his forehead furiously with a large white handkerchief. The beads of perspiration were standing out all over him.

"Gad!" he gasped, "how that winds one! I'll bet that's the first time I've danced in twenty years. Never was much of a hand at it; or should I say foot, eh? Not bad that! And we didn't make such a bad fist of it at that, did we? There's a chance for another pun, but I'll let you make it; it's beyond me." He appeared rather pleased with himself than otherwise.

Marian laughed with him; but even so she was not quite at ease. There was another dance coming! At the first signs of its commencement, the Colonel looked about him hastily; then led his partner straight up to his guest, Miss Connie Leveredge, pushing his way through the flock of young men surrounding her, and pulling Marian after him. Connie had been an instant success—the most obtuse observer might have seen that. The Colonel had seen it, too. He pushed forward to her side.

Connie smiled pleasantly up at her host as he led Marian forward.

"Connie," he said, "did you meet Miss Marian Pritchard?"

Connie puckered her brows. "I—I don't think I did,"

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she said mildly, smiling and putting out a slender white-gloved hand. "How do you do?"

Marian shook the extended hand dumbly. She felt very heavy and coarse beside such delicate grace and distinction. Connie looked enquiringly up at the Colonel. He answered her interrogation briefly.

"I want you to keep Miss Marian by you while I look up Don. Miss Marian doesn't know many people here; you've met 'em all; you might introduce her to a few."

"Oh, yes, certainly." Connie made a place for Marian beside her; but they had little opportunity to talk for the young men kept breaking in with inconsequent chatter, and appeals to Miss Leveredge to give them just one more dance!—theirs had been such a very short one! And Connie sat there and laughed and promised and forbade. The Colonel had disappeared.

Then the music began again and some one came to claim Connie for the dance. She glanced at Marian, hesitated a moment, and then reaching the slender arm with its perfectly fitting, immaculate, white glove across the girl's lap, she twitched at the sleeve of a young man just beyond.

"Mr. Willett—Frank— isn't your name Frank? No, don't stop to ask me how I knew it was Frank. Well, I *think* it's Frank anyway. I think you look as if your name was Frank, and that's what I mean to call you. Frank, have you this dance engaged?"

Willett, the man addressed, was a simple soul and given to self-adulation. Besides, he had been busy elsewhere and had not observed the approach of Miss Leveredge's partner. For one fatal moment he fancied—poor gullible youth—that Connie, smitten perhaps by his *beaux yeux* (he was a vain young man) meant to offer herself

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as a partner for this dance. He smiled fatuously and said eagerly:

"No—no, indeed, I've not asked any one. I'm free."

"Then dance it with Miss— You'll give it to him, won't you, Miss—Miss—I don't think I caught your name, but his is Willett, Mr. Frank Willett. Yes, Mr. Bently, I'm coming at once. So sorry to keep you waiting!" She whirled away in her new partner's arms.

The depressed Willett rose miserably and offered a limp hand to Marian. But his sacrifice was unnecessary; a cheerful voice spoke suddenly behind them:

"I say, Willett, get out of that; this is my dance—promised me ever so long ago, wasn't it, Marian?"

And Donald was there; strode forward majestically, all-conquering, tossed the reluctant Willett aside like chaff before the wind; and before Marian quite knew where she was, they were out on the floor and whirling about faster and more recklessly than any of the others.

It was always said of Donald Callender, wherever he went that he was the most perfect dancer in the world. Certainly it seemed so to Marian, held a willing prisoner in his arms, swaying in rhythm to the joyous music, feeling the quick pulse of delight, the abandon of physical motion and the keen sense of security which his proximity gave her.

She saw now that in the outer rooms there were other girls sitting out as she had done; but with a difference. They were grouped together in little bunches, whispering, laughing, giving the appearance of being quite gay in spite of everything. Or their faces wore an expectant look as if their discomfiture was only temporary; or they were whimsically smiling as if secretly a little amused at finding themselves in this unusual plight. They waved their hands encouragingly to friends who passed

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dizzily by, secure for the moment in masculine embrace.

And then there were the mothers who watched these same daughters anxiously, with biting lips (oh, most bitter of wounds in the maternal breast to see one's own flesh and blood slighted). These sometimes forgot to smile. When the girls were dancing they watched with strained attention, fearful for a mishap, praying, hoping fervently, that they might not lose their grip!

The dance with Donald ended and he found her some punch. Then he led her through the rooms again and out into the conservatory, that crowning glory of the more pretentious houses of the period—a large semi-circular shaped room walled with glass and made to look exotic with palms, ferns, rubber plants, and a small, rather messy-looking pool in the centre on which floated a number of limp, discouraged lily pads.

Donald led her to a white bench carved to resemble a marble balustrade and in the shade of a giant palm; and there, standing before her with one foot raised to the bench, he made his apologies.

"I say, you know, I had no idea you'd been sitting there so long. It's a shame! Not your fault, of course. But you couldn't be expected to dance if you didn't know people. I'd clean forgotten about you myself. Sorry, but that's the truth of it. It's a fact. I'm no end sorry. The governor came out to me here—I was sitting with Maisie Delano—and he butted right in. He was in a tearing fury, red-hot he was. Said no one was treating you decently; said he'd be damned if he'd stand it. That I'd no right to ask you here if I didn't mean to look after you. Said you were the best little dancer in the room and had 'em all skinned for looks. Made me feel no end ashamed of myself. It was awfully thoughtless of me, but you'll forgive me, won't you?"

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"It doesn't matter," she said with proud lips. Her heart was fluttering strangely, mingled pain and exultation in her breast.

"But it does matter," he said, "if you were annoyed."

"I—I wasn't." She looked up at him from under lowered lids, hoping he might not see the tears in her eyes or guess how close she was to breaking down. Strange, how it moved her to have him thus solicitous for her happiness. The emotion which her hurt pride had not drawn from her threatened to become evident now under the soothing influence of his sympathy.

He stood looking down at her, wondering a little at her shyness. For he thought it only shyness. But the music was sounding again and he mercifully spoke and saved her.

"There's the next dance. Come in and have it with me."

"Not—not now," she breathed. "You go."

But this he would not have. He led her back into the dancing room and they danced again.

No one could have been more solicitous in looking after her. At the conclusion of the number they joined a group of young people. As with Connie, there was always a group about Donald when he wanted it, and never once did he let Marian feel she was neglected or unwelcome—she shared for the time being in his popularity, his triumph. The others subtly felt the difference in her status, and their attitude towards her changed unconsciously. The third dance began and Donald said to her in a low aside:

"I've this one engaged—worse luck! but I'll see you fixed up first. Tenniel," he spoke with the voice of authority, "Tenniel, this is Miss Pritchard. Don't know whether you met before." And although nothing further

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was said Tenniel understood. It was the same man who had refused the Colonel the favour of dancing with her, but now matters were different—so strong is the power of influence, so keen the competitive instinct in men. Donald Callender for some reason found this girl interesting—that was enough for Tenniel.

“May-a-have-a-pleasure?” he asked.

It was all so simple and agreeable now.

Just before he left her Donald whispered to her: “Supper’s served after this one. I’ll come back for you.”

But for that whisper Marian’s old feeling of disquietude might have come back to her when she saw Donald dancing with Connie, and Connie laughing so heartily at something he was telling her. Connie threw her a glance or two. It looked as if she and Donald were discussing her, and Marian grew a shade confused, and stumbled over the obsequious Tenniel’s feet. Then she remembered Donald’s reassuring words and forgot about everything else.

He came for her soon after the dance ended as he had promised, but Marian was apprehensive of the time.

“I—I’m afraid I can’t stay for supper. I’m to meet Ted at the foot of the drive at half-past eleven. It must be nearly that now, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I say, but that’s a shame! Why must you go so early? Don’t do it; keep him waiting a bit.”

She hung her head. “But I can’t; I promised. I said I’d surely be there at half-past eleven. He’ll be looking for me.”

He looked at his watch.

“But it’s that now.”

“Yes, I know. And I really think I’d better go. I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t stay for supper.”

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"Well, then," he said, "I'll cut it, too, and walk a ways down the drive with you."

"Oh, but I don't want you to do that," she protested.

"Why not? You don't suppose I'd let you go alone, do you?"

She had no reason to give him, none to give herself, save those tingling apprehensions which his presence and his voice seemed now to rouse in her; so she remained dumb under his searching glance. He assumed the matter settled.

"You have a wrap?"

"Only a scarf. I'll get it in a second."

It was a relief to her to find that the impertinent maid, called to further duties below connected with the serving of supper, was gone from upstairs. She caught up her scarf from the bed and hurried down the stair to find Donald waiting for her outside the half-closed front door. He opened it quickly as she reached the bottom of the staircase and motioned her outside. His face looked rather flushed.

"Don't bother to say good night. There are so many here mother will never notice whether you did or not. Come quickly; I don't want any one to see me ducking the party in the middle like this!"

Together they sped down the drive out of range of the lighted windows. Around a turn Donald's speed lessened and he put a detaining hand on Marian's arm.

"Let's take it easy here. You've still a few minutes before you're due at the gate; and I'm blame glad to get away from that clatter in there for a little while."

So he said; but in his heart he was really wondering why he had come down here with her—away from the house, leaving all the lights and gaiety behind. It certainly hadn't been politeness alone that influenced him.

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He was always polite—at least he hoped he was—but it was because politeness was natural to him, as natural as for him to hold the centre of any stage and to always get what he wanted. He felt that you got on better and people liked you more if you showed good manners. Moreover, it pleased him to please others. But of innate chivalry, of the essence of kindness, he possessed little. If he had not felt impetuously impelled to go with Marian to-night he would have allowed her to go alone without the least scruple. He was essentially selfish—selfish with a bland assurance which, however, could not be called conceit—he was simply as every one agreed—charming. To-night, as usual, he had yielded to impulse. Why?

It was a clear starlit night. Beneath the thick arching trees of the drive it was dark with a darkness that seemed soft to the touch, a tangible thing. A cool little wind had risen, and rustled the tree tops above them stealthily. Beneath, in the soft darkness, they could just make out one another's figures moving silently along the hard dirt road.

Again Donald put a hand upon her arm. This time he did not take it away but slipped it further through, and drew her close to him.

"It's so dark," he said apologetically.

They moved on more slowly. Where the tree shadows lifted somewhat and the stars shone through more clearly, he turned to her. She looked very delicate and ethereal in the dim light, her cloudy white muslin and the thin scarf she had wrapped about her shoulders giving her the appearance of some nymph or fairy fluttering midway between heaven and earth.

The sweet scent of new-cut hay floated to them over the tree tops, poignantly sweet, an odour to entangle and dizzy the senses.

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Out of the night there came to them the sharp staccato cry of a whippoorwill; and a moment later a night hawk darted over their heads, his harsh "ping-ping" drifting down to them.

"What a still night!" said Donald.

Halfway down the drive Marian shivered slightly; and Donald, stopping, pulled her scarf closer about her. In doing so his fingers, enmeshed in the chiffon folds, touched her soft throat and his pulses leapt suddenly. He gazed at her wonderingly.

"Wait a moment; I'm going to tuck this under so it won't come loose again," he whispered.

He had meant to do more, but she stood there mute under his ministrations, so cold and white and aloof that he hesitated. And as before he was aware of that vague, indefinable something that wrapped her round even as the frail scarf wrapped her slender throat and hid her from him so that he could only glimpse the beauty beneath—that almost palpable mantle of virginal innocence protecting her, that held him off and yet taunted him with a maddening sense of futility.

"Come," he said, a trifle brusquely for him, "we'll walk on."

The trees were thicker here and the scent of new-mown hay more definite. Stars winked above them through the gently swaying branches. There was no sound but the faint rustling of the leaves. They seemed to be miles away from the house and the lights and the music. It was very calm and quiet in the deep shadow of the drive, but something seemed to be stirring him up, whispering to him, "You're wasting your chances; you're losing time!" And yet he appeared powerless to do anything.

Before the last turn, a hundred yards or so from the gate, Marian herself paused.

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"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. I thought I could hear the sea."

"Oh, not way back here. We never hear it at the house except when there's a terrific storm."

Nevertheless, he paused, too. Perhaps she had heard it; the wind was growing stronger and the night was so very still. The wind sang in the tree tops. It blew a strand of Marian's hair in little ripples across her face.

An end of her scarf slipped away from her throat, and a sudden gust of air caught it and blew it across his face. There was a faint elusive scent in its folds, something old-fashioned and fragrant, as if it had lain long in old lavender. The scent mingled with the dreaming softness of the summer night, a softness that spoke of whispered confidences and romance, and sent a little shiver through him. He thrilled with a sudden sense of longing and of power.

She stood before him white and cold and virginal, and he saw her mouth just parted, as if she were drinking in the loveliness of the night, perhaps thrilled as he was thrilled. Or were they only mocking him, cold red lips . . . ?

He took a step toward her. He saw her eyes, luminous and lovely, staring up at him, dark in the moth-grey dusk—her eyes and the deliciously curved mouth. . . . Something whirled in his brain like a tightly wound spring let go, and of a sudden he caught her to him. He caught her to him and in the hush of the starshine kissed the tender parted lips.

She drew back from him quickly, but not before he had felt her lips close for a second upon his. She had not actually returned his kiss, but he had felt her lips there beneath his, warm and yielding and not unwilling.

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"Oh, no!" she cried, suddenly drawing away from him.

"Ah, but I want to."

"Hush, hush, Ted might hear us!"

"Don't go!" he besought her in whispers, "don't go!"

"But I must, I must!"

He saw that she was strangely excited, and that the lips he had kissed trembled violently. Suddenly she turned and ran from him. He followed her around the turn of the drive and stopped her with his hand upon her arm.

"No, no, you must not go—not now—not yet!"

She stood still at his command, a cloudy white figure in the dim starlight, mothlike in the grey dusk, obviously troubled and perplexed. She looked down the drive and saw a figure moving in the darkness between the pillars of the gate posts.

"Ted's there; I can see him."

"Pshaw! that's too bad. Why did he have to come so early!"

"I must go at once."

"You're sure it is he? Well, I suppose you must, then. But give me something first—you must give me something to remind me, to make me remember to-night."

She hesitated a moment; then held out to him the little nosegay of faded flowers.

"Yes, yes," he cried eagerly, and took them from her fingers. "Good-bye. Don't forget! Good-bye."

She fled from him down the drive.

Donald turned and walked slowly, thoughtfully, back towards the house. The nearer he came to it the more rapid his pace became. Within sight of the house it quickened still more; and in the darkness he smiled. His ro-

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mantic mood, serious enough at the time, was rapidly leaving him.

The house stood out boldly, brilliantly illuminated; he could hear as plainly as if he were in the midst of it, the laughter and gaiety within. The door was open and a wide shaft of light fell across the terrace. Standing in its blaze he looked down and saw the wilted flowers in his hand.

For a moment he hesitated, staring at them almost as if he had forgotten whence they had come. Then with a laugh he tossed them into the shrubbery by the side of the porch and entered the house.

3

All the way home, as she walked along beside Ted, Marian was not treading upon mere dusty road or grassy path. Instead, she trod the ether, lost in a rosy cloud of dreams, and feeling the ground beneath her feet far less than the print of two strong young lips upon her own. She was strangely bothered by Ted's occasional prosaic interruption of her golden reverie.

"Who was that with you in the drive?" he asked abruptly, when she joined him.

"Donald Callender. He walked down to the gate with me."

Ted appeared mollified.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, very nice indeed."

"Dance?"

"Ye-es. A number of times."

"Glad you went then?"

"Oh, yes."

The prim little answer held something less and something more than the truth. But her responses were me-

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chanical; her thoughts were far away. It seemed an endless way home.

4

Her mother was already in bed when they reached home. She did not come out of her room to greet Marian, and the latter crept quietly, almost guiltily, into her own little bedroom at the front of the house. She was glad her mother was not there to question her. Could her mother possibly guess? She heard Ted shutting up the house down below.

Without undressing, she crossed at once to the window, and in the darkness knelt there, still in her soft white dress and filmy scarf; knelt there, staring out at the black massed trees outlined against the star-powdered heavens. The scent of the new-mown hay, which had thrilled her so in the drive, did not reach her here, but from her window, in the stillness like this, the sea was plainly audible. It crooned a song to her, delicately insistent, which the softly swaying trees took up and carried on. The whole scene, the night, the stars, the distant murmuring ocean, filled her with an ecstasy almost too great to bear; thrilled her with happiness almost painful in its intensity.

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and bowed her head in them. "Oh, God! Oh, beauty! Oh, night! Oh, sea!" she murmured. It was a prayer, thanksgiving, dedication.

Only the stars wheeling in their courses watched her. They shone down upon her bowed head and gave no sign; the eternal eyes of heaven that through generation after generation had looked down upon lovers as young, as hopeful, as vibrant as this one. They still watch and give no sign. What tales they might tell, those all-seeing, silent stars!

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But Marian was not thinking of this as she knelt there; only of the wonder and the joy of life. Between Donald and herself there had been no word of love spoken, yet she knew that she loved, lost now forever in the dream, the memory, the white wonder of that first kiss.

CHAPTER VI

I

MARIAN saw Donald twice again before he went back to college. The first of these occasions was when, in the course of the week following the dance, she was asked up to a tennis party at the Hall.

There were only the house guests there and she was asked to fill out in doubles. She only played one set. She stood up with one of the visiting young men and played against Donald and Connie.

Connie played in a white dress all lace ruffles, and a large, flapping leghorn hat with a rose placed a little to the left of the wide brim. She looked extraordinarily pretty on the white court in the glare of the summer sunlight, as she held up her lacy skirts with one hand, and ran, shrieking with laughter, after the ball, her racket waving wildly in the other—but it wasn't exactly tennis.

Marian, who had been taught by Ted Chamberlayne, played a firm, serious game. She had no idea herself how good it was, really, for Ted always beat her; but she knew at least that it was consistent tennis. It was something of a shock to her to see how Connie treated the game, and that the others didn't seem to mind particularly. Ted would have died before he would have played in such a game!

At the conclusion of their set which Marian and the visiting young man won with a score of six love, Connie fanned herself vigorously with her lace-edged handkerchief and protested, laughing:

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"I'm all in! How silly of us to play such a dreadful game as that on a hot day. It's absurd! And why do you suppose the balls never touch my racket? I'm sure it's not my fault; I run hard enough. Donny, I think there's something the matter with these balls; they've cheated you. I know I ran and ran. But I shan't any more. It's ridiculous to get so overheated. I vote we call the tennis off for the day, and go sit under the trees on the terrace. I'm simply perishing of thirst. Dick will you get me a drink? And, Donald, will you fetch me my vanity case? I left it up at the house on the library table, I think. Anyway, it's somewhere about. And do lend me your handkerchief to mop myself off with; mine's simply dripping. What a heathenish game!"

She had them all waiting on her and running errands. One or two of the other girls ventured to protest against this summary elimination of the tennis, but in the end Connie had her way. They all moved over to the shade of the terrace where tea was served to them over which Connie presided.

Marian had been extremely silent all afternoon. She was always shy in strange company and the truth of the matter was Connie and the other girls awed her. They seemed so very grown up.

She sat crosslegged on the ground, a little way from Connie, her racket lying across her knee. She seemed a bit out of it, as it were, and Connie, amused somewhat by her evident youth and diffidence, sought, rather good-naturedly, to enter into conversation with her.

"What good tennis you play. You play a great deal, don't you? You must, to be so good at it."

"Yes," said Marian shyly. "We—we play quite a lot."

"You have such a good serve; who taught it to you?"

"Ted taught me."

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Connie looked slightly amused and interested.

"And who's Ted?"

Marian coloured furiously.

"Ted Chamberlayne. He—he's a man who lives at our house."

"Oh," said Connie; and added rather irrelevantly: "Your mother teaches dancing, doesn't she? Or something like that?"

"No, not dancing. She teaches riding."

Marian was stirring restlessly and digging her heel into the ground. It was really in the main only embarrassment at being personally addressed; it did not occur to her to resent Connie's questions.

Connie was quite aware that it was her own superior personality that affected Marian so detrimentally to the latter's poise. She was used to being extravagantly admired and accepted homage as a right. She laughed pleasantly.

"Dear me, child, don't wriggle so!"

Marian flushed and became suddenly as still as a marble statue. Connie, patronising still, but feeling that she might have been a trifle too condescending in manner, returned to her conversation.

There was, in fact, only about two or three years' difference in their ages, but at that time of life it is a difference of generations. Marian was too young, too inexperienced, and too much impressed with a sense of Connie's importance to resent anything she said. She was embarrassed and ill at ease, wished heartily that Connie would turn her attention elsewhere; but she had no idea how to accomplish such a thing. And Connie, secure in a sense of her superior *savoir faire*, was intent, now she had begun, upon learning the full history of the little girl beside her. She was frankly greedy for knowledge, not because she

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was especially interested in Marian, but simply because hers was the sort of nature which finds its expression in questioning, and which takes account of anything which nearly concerns its neighbours, whether those neighbours are in themselves interesting or not.

So she drove the conversation along the lines of Marian's early history. Had she always lived in Whitridge? Oh, only for the last seven years? And where had she lived before that? And did she go to school? And where?

Her thirst for information somewhat appeased, or perhaps bored with the commonplaceness of Marian's history, she was silent for a few minutes; and Marian hoped the inquisition was over. But she was mistaken. Connie added one more question—rather carelessly:

"Your father's not living, I suppose?"

Marian, still sitting crosslegged on the ground, flushed darkly.

"I—I don't know," she said shortly.

"Oh," said Connie, and stared at her with wide eyes. A moment later she became absorbed in the tea things.

Marian sat with downcast eyes. It would have been easy to have answered "yes" to Connie's question, but that solution had never occurred to her. She was not given to telling untruths.

Connie, although she questioned Marian no further, had made a mental note of the girl's last answer, connecting it, with a cleverness somewhat in advance of her years, with Marian's former reply about the man—what was his name?—Ted something, who "lived at their house"; and she determined later to seek information on the subject from Mrs. Callender. The latter, naturally, had not thought it necessary to inform her young guest of the current gossip concerning the striking-looking Mrs.

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Pritchard down in the village who had eloped with the young man now employed by her. It was said there that he had been her groom, but that was not so, although in the little cottage with the big riding stables and where money was scarce, he did perform a groom's services.

Mrs. Callender, heretofore, had not seen fit to mention the affair to Connie. It was not, she felt, a tale suited to the ears of a young lady brought up as Connie had been; but being questioned on the subject, and at Connie's own request, she willingly gave her what information was at her command.

Elaine Pritchard, well known socially in a distant city, it would seem, had eloped with her lover, Captain Chamberlayne, once of the British army, and had taken her child with her. Strangely enough, the husband had not pursued, or if he had, they had come to an understanding about the child. At all events, she was left in the mother's charge.

She and her partner in sin, wearing the cloak of respectability, and with the statement that "this man Chamberlayne" was her secretary, had come to Whitridge as a quiet place to live. Later, when money apparently became scarce (the wronged husband, however complaisant regarding his daughter's future, had not included in his generosity means for this irregular family's support) later, but before things were quite thoroughly known, the woman had opened a riding school. She purchased a fine string of horses, her terms were reasonable, and people from Thornton and neighbouring towns became enthusiastic in taking up the sport. She had little difficulty in securing pupils; she really had a knack at teaching children, it was said. She worked hard and it was supposed thus made a meagre living for the three of them—Marian, Ted and herself. Perhaps the man Chamberlayne had a bit of his own as well, but if so it was very

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little. Other than in their professional capacity neither Mrs. Pritchard, as she called herself, nor the man Chamberlayne, saw anything of Thornton or Whitridge people. From the beginning they had shown no inclination for society of any sort.

It was not until they had been some time in the village that the story of their relations had leaked out and the true state of affairs was known; although, of course, as in all such cases, people declared afterward that they had known all along how matters stood. But Mrs. Callender's sister had heard it first from an intimate friend whose cousin lived in the same city where the Pritchards had formerly lived. The current newspapers of the place were unearthed; pictures and articles found; the news rushed to Whitridge. There could really be no doubt that these were the same people, no doubt at all in the matter.

"Of course," Mrs. Callender finished, "no one has anything to do with her in town, although Whitridge appears to be complaisant enough. She lost some pupils when the news came out, no doubt, but others still let her teach their children, and of course they're quiet and outwardly behave themselves. They haven't ever tried to know people. They say the child was sent home from a boarding school where they tried to send her, on account of it. I think myself they should not have attempted it. Yet in spite of this, Colonel Callender insists upon my asking her here as you see, because Donald happened to play with her as a child." Her tone was aggrieved, and there was a touch of the old rancour in her voice.

"I thought Donald wanted her himself," said Connie calmly. "And after all," she added slowly, "it's not the child's fault."

"No. Naturally. But women ought to think of those things before they disgrace themselves. She should be

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made to see what her behaviour brings upon the child."

"Perhaps. Yes, I suppose in a way that's so." Connie was not altogether convinced. "Still," she added brightly, "it's awfully romantic, the story, don't you think so?"

Mrs. Callender frowned.

"I don't like to hear you express such sentiments, Connie."

Connie smiled indulgently. "Oh, come now, Aunt Clara"—she had called Mrs. Callender aunt from earliest infancy—"you know they don't bring up girls now as if they were wrapped in cotton wool. Girls of to-day know things that women of sixty didn't used to."

But Mrs. Callender would not agree. She repeated: "Especially do I not like to hear it from you because you know my hopes and plans about you and Donald—mine and your mother's."

Connie laughed again gaily.

"Oh, aunt, for shame! When you know we've agreed not to discuss that for years to come—four or five at least."

The older woman considered Connie's remark in silence; and then decided that a slight hint of warning might not come amiss. In spite of Donald's assurance and his three months' superiority in age, Connie always seemed to her so much older, so much more experienced in the ways of the world than her son. She could talk to Connie as woman to woman.

"There is another reason," she said gravely, "why I don't want that Pritchard child to come here. It's on account of Donald."

"Donald!" Connie repeated, somewhat puzzled.

"Yes. Donald's growing up as you are, too. You're young yet, both of you. Still, attachments are formed

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even as young as Donald is—permanent attachments, I mean. That child we are speaking of is pretty, and there is the fascination of the so-called romance of her surroundings. You yourself thought of it and spoke of it just now. Doubtless it makes a sort of appeal to Donald, too. Suppose that feeling were to ripen into something stronger?"

"What!" Connie interrupted aghast, "that little thing!"

Then she laughed. It was too ridiculous, too preposterous! Donald, so debonair, so sophisticated, so pampered and favoured by nature, and that quiet little mouse of a girl, that awkward child! It was absurd!

"Aunt Clara, you're joking!"

Mrs. Callender smiled complacently, and then immediately looked grave.

"I am sure I hope you are right, Connie. I earnestly hope so. But, Connie, ever since that woman settled here, years ago, I've had a superstitious dread that Donald might come to grief through them. It began, I think, with a quarrel I had with Peter about them, about asking the child here. I distrusted them from the start. It's been the fear of my life that Donald might fall in love with the girl. I rely on you, you know, to make that impossible."

"Oh," said Connie, very softly and thoughtfully.

"Peter," Mrs. Callender added, "thinks I'm a foolish old woman to be considering such happenings so early."

Connie rose and kissed her hostess before she left the room.

"I think you are, too, aunt," she said briefly.

2

The second time that Marian saw Donald was when he said good-bye.

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She was standing in the little main street of Whitridge, outside the general store, when Donald and his friends came through on horseback. A half dozen or more, they rode clattering past. Connie, in a red skeleton coat, was in the lead, the man they called Tenniel by her side. They did not see Marian standing by the side of the road. Donald was in a group closely bunched and following a few paces in their rear. He and one or two others waved to Marian as they swept by.

A moment later Donald glanced back over his shoulder. Marian was still standing there gazing thoughtfully after them. Donald pulled in his horse and wheeling about, came back to her. Sitting up there above her he smiled; stooped low in the saddle to speak to her.

"I stopped to say good-bye. Maybe I'll not have another chance. We're all off in the morning, the whole crowd. Going on to Tenniel's place for another house party. I'll go from there directly to college. I've got to be there early this year; I'm manager of the football team, you know. Sorry not to see you again."

He sat there above her looking down upon her and smiling his frank boyish smile. He looked very young and fair and very attractive and alluring, but she could not find the words to answer him.

His smile became whimsical.

"Well, have you nothing to say?"

"I—I'm sorry you're going." She felt that she was blushing and that it made her very absurd. "I hope you'll have a good time. And—and I hope you'll enjoy this year of college."

"That's a sure thing."

He waited, tapping his boot with his crop, evidently expecting her to say something further. She rallied her forces.

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"You'll be back for Christmas?"

"I hardly think so, although I'm not certain. We might be here but I think we're more apt to go south. I rather doubt if we'll come back here. I don't know. After college closes we may go abroad again."

"Oh!" she said softly.

"Well, good-bye!" He stooped low in the saddle and held out his hand.

"Good-bye."

He was looking at the full red mouth which he had once kissed. Suddenly he remembered he was in Whitridge Main Street. Yet still he paused.

"I say, we'll ride together again when I come back, whenever it is."

"Oh, yes," she agreed eagerly.

"So long! That's a promise then. Don't forget!"

He rode on and joined the others who had drawn up and were waiting for him a little further down the road. As he came alongside them, Tenniel slapped him on the back.

"Look here, old man, you've got it rather bad on the little girl. Thought you were going to kiss her and all that. Connie, here, was awfully frightened. She was for organising a rescue party but we did our best to restrain her."

Donald laughed and Connie laughed, too. She gave him a quick look as he pressed forward among the crowd, and placed himself at her side. But no one noticed the odd expression in her eyes.

CHAPTER VII

I

MARK WETHERELL missed Donald by only two days. He came home on the Saturday after Donald and his party left Whitridge, and promptly presented himself at Marian's door. She had not seen him for several months—all summer, in fact, and before that only in short vacation times, and her welcome was genuinely cordial.

He had changed quite a bit, she noticed, and mentally she compared him with Donald Callender. He was somewhat shorter than Donald but still half a head taller than herself, stockier of build, with the strong wide shoulders of the athlete and a fair open countenance over which the smiles chased one another with the changing swiftness of sunlight and shadow.

He had been working, he told her, all summer, tutoring, doing one thing or another. Even so he didn't know if there'd be enough to send him back to college this year. Things weren't quite right at the rectory, and, anyway, his mother had wanted him to come home for a while. She wasn't as well as she had been. At all events, there would be time enough for them to ride; his mother wanted him to. All this he told her within the first five minutes. There was no hint of disappointment or impatience in his manner.

After all he did go back, but not until late in the year. He and Marian rode together all through the long golden autumn. She loved being with him. There was some-

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thing so easy, so comfortable about their companionship. No one else held quite the same familiar place in her affections. She experienced a complete un-self-consciousness which had been absent in her rides with Donald. Here there were no flutters, no alarms and excursions of emotions, no nervous shrinkings, no eager dreads; in short, no fear at all. Thinking of this once she asked herself, "Is it truly love when you're afraid?"

But the open countenance of this large-hearted boy whom she knew so well could give her no answer, nor could the swiftly changing colours of autumn tell her; so she let the question slip by, living for the present in the joyous acclaim of hoof beats thudding in unison down the long miles of dusty, sun-coloured roads, cantering far back into the country, past luxuriant orchards heavy with reddening apples, and through dim woods where slow leaves gently falling whispered of dull, quiet days to come. And in the misty twilights, when the air grew suddenly crisp and tingling, home again on slowly lagging feet, clattering dreamily through the long village street where lights gleamed cosily in the windows, while outside the smouldering bonfires which the children had left and forgotten lifted thin grey wreathes of smoke to melt in the haze above, and the delicate acrid odour filled the air like a vague, intangible longing.

A cheery hail at parting; then home, tired and sleepy, to supper, a book by the fresh living-room fire, all the untried wonders and glories of literature before one; then bed and the long, peaceful oblivion of the dreamless sleep of youth.

No suggestion of anything beyond this happy companionship had entered Marian's head, until one day late in October Mark said to her:

"We used to ride down on Hodder's Beach so much,

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don't you remember? You never want to go there now; why is it?"

Marian coloured furiously; and suddenly she was a little ashamed.

"I don't know. Let's go now."

So they followed the sea road down to where a grey-green ocean thrashed angrily at the beach. Far out on the edge of the horizon a ship hovered, ghostly, uncertain. It was a dull day following one of storm, and with promise of storm to come. The tide was high, and only a narrow strip of beach, strewn with seaweed and scraps of wreckage, remained between the high banks beyond which was the road, and the swirling waters.

"We might try a run," Mark suggested.

They cantered, but there was not the same spirit in it as heretofore. The wavelets, running far up the beach, eddied about Nance's feet and the salt spray got in her nostrils. She shook it out impatiently and expressed disapproval of the whole performance. Nance liked to have her way in these matters and, like her mistress, she was in no mood for Hodder's Beach to-day.

At the end of the run, when the horses were walking once more, Mark leaned over and put his hand on Marian's bridle.

"You're not thinking of me," he complained.

Marian turned her grey eyes upon him for a moment.

"I was watching that ship out there."

"But I don't want you to watch ships. I want you to look at me."

"But what for?"

"Because I like you to."

She smiled at him and glanced back at the ship. It was already sinking below the grey haze that masked the horizon. Her thoughts were far away with an invisible

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flock of sand birds, turning, glinting, fluttering out over a sparkling summer sea—

The sharp sound of Mark's horse raising his head and jangling the bit in his mouth brought her abruptly back to the present. She saw Mark gazing at her with his keen, open smile, and suddenly she felt terribly ashamed, as if she had been guilty of a disloyalty towards the boy beside her.

"Tell me," she said quickly, in order to hide her confusion, "you think you'll be able to go back to college after all?"

The smile disappeared from his face, but his eyes lighted up. "Yes," he replied, in a voice somewhat tense but restrained, "I'm to go back; it's all arranged. They'll let me in again—the Dean has been awfully decent—and we—we think we can manage about the money." He hesitated and then spoke frankly: "You see, the Colonel wrote—Colonel Callender—and said he'd see me through. My father wouldn't hear of it at first, but he's consented at last. And now my mother is so much stronger—"

"How awfully nice," she said, patting Nance's neck, "I'm so glad for you! Only I'm sorry, too, because you'll be leaving here. You'll go soon, I suppose."

"Yes, very soon; next week in fact. So this may be our last ride together."

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

"So am I. I'll miss these rides, I can tell you. You don't know how I've enjoyed them. But then, I do want to go back. I felt so badly about it when I thought I couldn't. I didn't say anything much—I couldn't under the circumstances—but I was as blue as indigo about it."

"It was good of the Colonel," she said thoughtfully.

Their horses were proceeding at a footpace along the hard grey sands.

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"Wasn't it! He's a brick, that man! Of course it's all a secret, you understand—about his helping me. But I thought it was so corking of him that I wanted you to know. You won't tell?"

"Oh, no. But it's splendid, isn't it?"

"Of course I intend to pay it back—the money, I mean—directly I'm out of college, if not before. I may be able to make it up next summer."

"Of course. Still, it was good of him. And how lovely to be able to do such things. Had—had Donald anything to do with it, do you think?" She felt herself blushing as she put the question.

"Oh, no," Mark replied carelessly. "Donald's no idea of it. Colonel Callender said particularly that Donald wasn't to know anything about it. I saw him up in town last week—my father and I went up, and he stipulated expressly that Donald wasn't to know."

"I wonder why?"

Mark flushed slightly. "I think it shows the Colonel's good taste. To me it makes it all the nicer that he shouldn't want any one to know. Most men, if they were generous like that, would want the credit of it to extend a little to their families. I don't know if I can explain it very well—you wouldn't understand that sort of thing—but most men would have wanted, unconsciously perhaps, to give their sons a chance to crow over me."

"Donald wouldn't do that!" Her tone was reproofing.

Mark gave her a quick look.

"No, really, I don't think he would. Of course, I didn't mean that quite as it sounded. I've always been too fond of Donald to think that. Still, if you're accepting favours you don't want any more people to know about it than have to; and the Colonel appreciates that. By the way, you've never yet told me what you think of

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Donald now you've seen him again. Tell me something about him. How did he seem?"

Marian hesitated, flushing. She felt strangely shy of speaking of Donald; yet Mark did not appear to notice her embarrassment.

"Do you think he's changed much?"

"A good deal," she admitted.

"More than I have?"

"You!" She looked at him with laughing, friendly eyes. "Why, you haven't changed a bit. You're exactly the same. And I've a feeling you always will be."

"Will be what?"

"Exactly the same."

"No improvement then?"

"Perhaps you don't need any improvement."

"Oh, really, now, not so complimentary!"

They both began to laugh. Yet she could see that Mark was pleased. She wondered faintly why she could never adopt this tone with Donald. Was it that he awed her? Was his superiority so overwhelming? Mark didn't awe her in the least. She was only fond of him.

There was silence for a time. Then Mark said, with a certain shy admiration, "Do you remember how you raced Donald and me here on the sands one day and beat us both?"

"Oh, but you gave me a handicap."

"It didn't matter. You were miles ahead. How you could run as a child! I've never seen any one quite so fleet of foot."

Marian laughed. "Do you remember how Donald dared you to wade out with your clothes on and you did, until I made you come back?" she rejoined eagerly.

"Indeed, I do. If you hadn't cried and made such a fuss I believe I'd still be wading out."

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"Oh, it was so horrid! I was dreadfully upset about it. And it ruined your clothes."

"Donald didn't care about that."

"No, but your mother did. I remember you weren't allowed to play with us for a week afterward."

"Served me right! Extravagant young beggar! But, then, I always was inclined to take up Don's dares. They were pretty wild sometimes. I don't know what we should have done if we hadn't had you there to tone us down now and then. How you did use to read the riot act to us when we took to cutting up!"

"Nonsense! You two bullied me horribly! You used to pull my hair."

"Never! I never did. Donald may have. I know it was very long and tempting. In fact, I'm still tempted—"

She threw him a laugh over her shoulder.

They had come to the rocky end of the beach, and while they climbed the steep, narrow path up the cliff there was necessarily no more conversation between them. Mark, coming behind Marian, watched her as she leant well over Nance's neck preparatory to the scramble upward over the loose stones, and how she seemed to signal the mare with scarcely perceptible motions of her hands. The understanding between the two, girl and horse, seemed very complete. He wished that he understood her half as well, and he sighed.

"Let's cut across lots, past the church," he suggested, "and go back that way past the rectory. Can't you come in for a moment to see my mother? She's feeling pretty fit to-day; I know she'd like to see you. She spoke last night about seeing you so seldom now. She said she believed it was years since you'd been here and you used to come to the house so much."

Marian flushed and hesitated.

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"Oh, no, I couldn't to-day. I'm not dressed for calling."

"That doesn't matter. You used to come, you know—when we played together. Do you remember the day I fell out of the apple tree and broke my arm?"

"Do I! I was never so frightened in all my life!"

"Well, I don't believe you've been to the house since then."

"Oh, Mark, surely I must have."

"I'm certain of it. Won't you come to-day?"

Marian felt very uncomfortable. She would like to go, but she felt unnaturally shy about it—if it was really true that she had not gone for such a long time. She was not quite sure why she didn't want to see Mark's mother, and she couldn't explain to him her hesitation, but it had to do with that half-distant day when she had been sent home from school and the thousand-and-one fears that that occurrence had engendered in her. She had not at that time actually resolved to forswear the society of Whitridge, but some such thought had taken shape in her mind. Nevertheless, Mrs. Wetherell had always been charming to her; and, after all, Donald Callender had kissed her. She couldn't be such a pariah then! She flushed at the remembrance, but it gave her the courage to say:

"All right, then, let's do that."

They wheeled their horses through a gap in the broken-down rail fence, sagged and bent from winter winds and snows, and were soon trotting across the exposed highlands, the flat summit of which is crowned by the squat tower of St. Peter's.

The ground beneath them, stretching back from the edge of the cliff, was a hard, wild-looking moorland, covered with low scrubby bushes and patches of coarse grass

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and heather. The arable fields surrounding Whitridge ceased far back behind the gradually rising headland, so that from here the village looked as though it were nestling in a valley of half-bare trees and soft-brown fields, ploughed, ready for the winter.

They trotted across the bare, open moorland. It dipped slightly in the centre and then rose again towards the cottages surrounding the life-saving station. Here was the road which, passing close to the cottages, wound upward to the church above, and back to Whitridge. Opposite the cottages, on the southern slope of the headland, where the rising ground behind gave some slight protection, some one had made a faint attempt at a garden.

Mark and Marian rode on and came presently to a high fence with a gate. Mark dismounted and tried it. It was locked.

"We should have come out higher up," he said. "I'd forgotten about this, though I did hear they'd fenced it in. It belongs to the cottages, you know." He fingered the gate.

Marian looked at it critically. "Nance could jump it, I think; though I've never given her much of that to do."

Mark glanced at her half angrily.

"Don't be absurd! Do you think I'm going to let you break your neck?"

She was looking backward.

"There's plenty of space for a good run."

But a man had come out onto the porch of one of the cottages—a fat man, with a singularly unprepossessing beard, and collarless. Mark hailed him.

"Hi there, you! Can't we get through here? This gate's locked."

The man inspected them coolly from across the road.

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"Can't say, young fella! That's private property you're on."

"I know," Mark responded impatiently, "but we'd forgotten it was fenced. It never used to be, you know."

"Well, 'tis now," the man remarked laconically.

Mark grew very red in the face.

"I'm the rector's son," he announced loftily.

"Be you now?" said the man. "And what of it?"

"I thought you might let us through."

"Oh, did you!" He came down from the porch, crossed the road at a leisurely pace and stood near them, leaning his arms on the fence.

Marian broke in abruptly; it seemed to her that Mark was managing the thing badly.

"We can go back a little way and around by the edge of the cliff so as to come out by the church. The fence doesn't run quite all the way to the edge, you see."

"'Taint very safe that close to the cliff's edge," the man answered her suggestion. Mark turned irritably.

"You might at least tell us whether you could let us through if you wanted to. Can you?"

"I don't say I could and I don't say I couldn't."

The man was maddeningly annoying.

"Well, then, why won't you let us through?" Mark was keeping his temper with difficulty. But Marian didn't keep hers at all. She didn't look at the man, but she spoke swiftly to Mark as she wheeled Nance about:

"Tell him to stand aside; I'm going to jump it."

"You're not!"

"I am."

He started toward her, but already she had Nance in position for the run. A short, sharp canter, an instant of poised suspense, a sudden upward rush—Nance was over the fence like a bird.

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"Hurrah!" cried the fat man involuntarily.

Marian trotted back towards them and stood still, waiting for Mark.

Mark had sprung into his saddle. He rode his horse back for the run Marian had taken; dashed at the fence. The horse came to a dead stop just on the other side. It was with difficulty that Mark stayed in the saddle.

"Curse you!" he muttered to the horse.

"You be rector's son," the fat man reminded him. He seemed very much amused at the whole performance, as if he were witnessing an entertainment expressly given for his benefit.

Without regarding him Mark wheeled the horse about, ran him back and over the same ground, with the same result as before.

"You must lift him, Mark," said Marian gravely from the road.

The boy set his teeth grimly and turned the horse about for a third try. But the fat man was evidently relenting.

"Here, here," he said, "don't try that any more. You'll get yourself hurt. I'll open the gate for ye. Wait a minute; you can come through."

"I will not," declared Mark hotly. "I'm going over!"

He rode again at the gate, and again the horse failed. He half rose, fumbled, fell against the fence and stood quivering with fear and anger, Mark still astride him, tight-lipped and white with annoyance. He was preparing for another try when the fat man interposed.

"Just see here, young fella, I'm not a-going to let you break down my fence so as t' satisfy your stinking pride. You stand away from there a minute." He hurriedly unlocked the gate. "Now then have a little sense and come through here." He threw the gate wide. "That other's too dangerous."

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"I'm going over," said Mark obstinately.

"Better come through, Mark." Marian spoke quietly, but decisively. "You can't get a horse to take a jump like that if he's badly frightened. See, he's trembling. You'll only hurt him if you try again. Please don't. I know about horses."

Reluctantly Mark yielded; he rode the horse ignominiously through the open gateway.

"Thank you," he said ungraciously to the fat man. They left him behind and followed the road on up past the church, standing grey as a shadow in the midst of the moorland. They could hear the waves gently lapping the beach far below them. Now that they had left the cottages around the lower turn, there did not appear to be another human being for miles and miles around.

It was all very peaceful and lovely alone here on the headland on this still, grey day—grey church, grey skies, grey stretches of moorland and grey, monotonous sea, but these two who viewed it were restless and ill at ease. There was a strained self-consciousness; a stark, unnatural *mauvaise honte* obtruded itself upon them.

"I've made a fool of myself! I'm a laughing-stock! I've let a cursed horse get the better of me and shown that I don't know anything; and all because of a disagreeable, obstinate old man!" was Mark's thought. And Marian, in spite of herself, was thinking: "Donald would have managed it differently. If he'd been in Mark's place the man would have let us through at once. No one ever refused Donald anything." She felt ashamed of herself even while she thought it.

They passed at a walk around the front of the church.

"It's a pity they didn't put the church near enough to the edge for you to see it from the beach," Marian remarked conversationally.

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"If they had it might tumble over on you some time. The cliff there crumbles all the time. That's why there are always so many loose stones at this end of the beach."

There was no enthusiasm in his response.

"Shall we ride out to the edge and look over?" Marian ventured timidly.

"You can, if you like. I'm not going to chance it. It would be just my luck to go over the cliff." He laughed scornfully. "No need of trying to hide the white feather to-day, is there? I've proved what I can do."

She gave him a look vaguely troubled and embarrassed.

"Oh, never mind; we won't, then. I don't care about it."

They turned the horses in the direction of Whitridge. The road from here on was a straight gentle slope. They rode silently, rather slowly, trotting where the road was flat enough to warrant it. Marian glanced at her companion from time to time with faint inquiry. At last she said:

"Ted wouldn't like it if he knew I'd taken Nance over that fence. Our horses aren't much used to jumping. He thinks it's bad for them."

"I expect it is."

He was superbly indifferent to her half-spoken penitence.

"We have to be careful of our horses. You see, they're about all we've got."

Mark's mouth was grimly set.

"You know how to jump, however."

"Yes."

Silence again for another quarter mile.

"Mark," she said suddenly, "are you angry with me?"

He denied it coldly. "No. Why should I be?"

"I—I thought, perhaps—because I jumped the fence—"

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"Why shouldn't you jump it if you wanted to? Have I complained?"

"Oh, no! Only I thought that—that perhaps—perhaps—"

"You don't think I'm blaming you because I'm a rotten rider, do you?"

"Oh, it wasn't that!" This very quickly. "And that's really a fearfully high jump."

"Was it? I don't know."

She opened her eyes wide.

"Surely you've jumped before?"

"Never!"

"Mark! To try a fence like that the first time!"

"You did it," he said obstinately.

She answered him quickly: "Yes, but it was higher than I thought. When Nance went up and up I thought we were never coming down again. You've no idea how frightened I was."

"You took it like a breeze," he said gloomily; but he felt better.

They came to the rectory, standing back from the road in its woodsy setting, with the white picket fence surrounding it. Marian looked inquiringly at Mark.

"It's rather late," she suggested.

"Oh no, it's not. Come in."

They turned in at the gate and rode up to the low-porched old house.

Cynthia Wetherell came to the doorway to meet them. She was very thin and pale and prematurely aged, so that she looked old to be Mark's mother. But her graciousness had been proof against the years of ill health and constantly needed courage. She greeted the girl warmly and led her into the rector's library, a tall, well-lighted room with bookcases running up to the ceiling.

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"Mark said he would try to get you to stop to-day, but I didn't know whether you'd be back in time or not. He's going to leave me again, you know. I suppose he has told you."

She laid her hand affectionately on Mark's arm. "Mark dear, go into the pantry and bring in the tea tray that's there. I told Jane she needn't bother about it. It's all ready, but I didn't want it in here until I was sure you were coming."

Mark disappeared into the pantry, and Cynthia turned once more to Marian.

"And how have you been, my dear? It is so very long since you have been here. Why haven't you come?"

Marian felt herself flushing and tried awkwardly to cover her confusion:

"Mark wasn't here. I didn't think you wanted to see me particularly. I've been busy at school—"

Mark returned with the tea tray and set it beside his mother on the polished-oak table. She poured them tea and passed them big pieces of thick black chocolate cake—the kind of cake that youth always loves; and while they sipped and ate, she talked charmingly of inconsequential things, that the size of their appetites might not be apparent even to themselves. She had a ready tact and a keen appreciation of the misgivings and diffidence of young people. Marian, under this kindly hospitality, felt hers rapidly slipping away from her. She found herself talking quite volubly for her; and was astonished when she rose to go, to find how late it was.

"You must come to see me sometimes after Mark goes," Cynthia said to her in parting. "I'll be very much alone then, you know." Marian promised she would come.

Mark rode home with her in the gradually deepening

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twilight. He seemed mysteriously to have recovered his good humour.

"I suppose you think I've made an awful ass of myself this afternoon," he said to her half-way home.

She was silent for a moment. Then she said quickly:

"I—I'm sorry I jumped it, Mark! Truly I am!"

"It doesn't matter," he replied, irritated, and yet somehow comforted. "Please don't talk about it any more. I wish you'd let the thing rest."

"All right," she said obediently.

At the entrance of the cottage driveway he turned to her.

"Marian," he said, "I might not see you again before I go. At least, we mayn't ever be together again like this. Marian, do you suppose you would—because I'm going away and all—would you—"

Instinctively she knew what was coming. The knowledge filled her with a strange disquietude. She felt, not frightened, but dreadfully aware that she was going to hurt him. They had both dismounted. Now he came a step nearer to her, still holding his horse's reins over his arm.

"Marian, won't you—"

"I can't, Mark, truly I can't!" She drew back hastily. She felt floods of colour rushing over her whole body. "I can't!"

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

"I can't," she repeated, "honestly I can't, Mark. I would—I would, only— Oh, you'll just have to believe it, Mark, for I can't tell you why."

"No matter," he said cheerfully. "I only thought because we were such old friends—" He broke off; sprang into the saddle.

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“Good-bye,” he called to her. “It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“Good-bye!”

She watched him down the road, then turned and led Nance up the drive to the cottage. She felt very unkind and disobliging. Yet how could she have done otherwise after Donald had— In the half darkness she blushed rosily. No, she couldn’t have done otherwise. She was fond of Mark, very fond of him, but her lips from henceforth, forevermore, were Donald’s.

CHAPTER VIII

I

S Mark had prophesied, the ride along Hodder's Beach was the last they had together that year.

There was a storm of several days' duration, and by the time the roads were fit again Mark had left for college.

For Marian, after he had gone, there were rides alone; rides through dull November browns and drabs in deep chilling silences when Nance's hoof beats on the hard ground sounded like an armament in the keen clear air. Gone the yellow and the changing leaf, the crimson and the gold; yet the leaden skies held, instead of regrets, memories of past days and joy and, better still, promises for the future. "There is no greater sorrow than the remembrance of happier days," says the poet, but that is only true when one is old or, at least, aging. Regret such as that is not for the very young. For youth there is always a poignant sweetness in melancholy, a fragrant pathos in the recalling of old, dead days and joys, but ah! there are also promises of days and joys to come; the rosy-coloured future is never really lost sight of.

Marian thought often of the future; and of Mark and Donald, but I am afraid more often of the latter than the former. Since that night of the dance he had taken his place as the hero of her imagination. She looked forward so eagerly to seeing him again, and the question,

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when would he be home once more, occurred to her constantly. Christmas, would he come at Christmas? Surely there was a strong possibility of it. She watched the attenuated days of chill November draw to a sombre close, saw December come in with a flurry of snow followed by a week's rain and biting cold; and was glad because it brought the holidays nearer.

Holidays! Youth! On with the seasons; on with the days, months, years; faster, faster! Youth lives for to-morrow, careless of the passing moments. Alas! oh, fond, oh, foolish youth! How you will hoard those idle passing moments later! How you will niggle and scheme to drag them out, and drag them out a little longer, only a little longer! counting, praying for more; giving them grudgingly into the maw of time, still hoping, how vainly, "from the dregs of life to receive what the first sprightly running could not give." Ah, bitter, bitter regrets! How precious they will seem to you then, those lost, uncounted hours flung now so carelessly away!

But now is the time of rejoicing, of dreams, of high hopes and aspirations. When life's at the spring, no matter what the season! On with the years, on with them, hurry them, scatter them, squander them! What matter if to-day be lost? To-morrow comes soon, and another morrow after that, and another and another. So many, so illimitable, those to-morrows! Alas! when one is young.

Christmas came, but Donald Callendar remained away from Whitridge. Christmas with its holly and ever-greens and general air of festivity; but the Hall was not opened. The long drifts formed on the roadway up the hill, only disturbed by the postman on his solitary rounds, or the rapid passing of one of the men from the Hall stables out in a cutter exercising the horses. Still

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and white the long snow fields stretched endlessly away on every side.

Donald Callender remained away, but Mark Wetherell came home. Marian met him in the main street of Whitridge one afternoon, just at the close of a clear, crisp, wintry day. It was but a short three days to Christmas and the little village was already in holiday attire. There was that joyful air of bustle and suppressed excitement about the streets, that atmosphere so significant of small places at this season. It was as if Christmas was an event known and celebrated only in Whitridge.

Marian had been shopping; her arms were full of bundles. She wore a little sealskin cap and a sealskin tippet caught close under her chin. Mark had been staring at her for several minutes before she saw him and called out a joyous greeting.

He crossed the street to her side. There was a queer, stifled feeling about his heart. He saw that, close to, she looked even prettier. Her eyes, eager with excitement, were clear and bright; her cheeks in the sharp air as rosy as the little berries on the sprig of holly that nestled in the soft brown fur at her throat.

"Christmas shopping, are you?" he asked. "You're still at it?"

"I've just finished the last errand. It's a comforter for old Mr. Horner, and a toy for his little grandchild. It's a new kind of jumping jack. I just found it in Smith's shop. See! Isn't it cunning?"

She quickly unwrapped the painted toy from its paper covering and held it out for his inspection.

"It works like this, with a handle."

She turned the handle and the doll moved up and down on its stick.

"Isn't that nice?"

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"Yes, it's great. The little tike will be tickled to death with it. Here, let me help you wrap it up again."

She was trying to do it herself, but the other packages got in her way. Mark attempted to help her, but they dropped the string between them and then the paper began to tear. The stick would protrude through the paper so that at last they had to give it up altogether.

"Never mind," he said, "let me carry it home for you. I've nothing to do. Give me some others."

She surrendered to him two or three, saying: "No, no, no more!" when he would have taken them all.

They started to walk down the long village street where the lighted windows cast long bars of colour on the snow. Glancing within, they caught here and there a glimpse of family life; a village parlour in festive array, a tired workman home again among his children, all the sweet familiarity of unpretentious domesticity. Outside before them was the long village street, its lights twinkling ahead in the velvet distance as the road wound upward towards the Callender hill, past the cottage.

"I've bought a pair of gloves for my mother," Marian was telling Mark, "and a key ring for Ted. It's not really a key ring but a little pocketbook with rings in it to hang keys on. I've got it somewhere here. I'll show it to you. Here it is. It opens with a snap, like this. What do you think of it? A good choice for Ted, don't you think? The woman in Smith's said he was sure to like it. She knew, because she says men come in and buy them for themselves sometimes, which shows they must think they're useful. Don't you think so?"

Mark was silent, looking at the little leather atrocity held in her outstretched hand. He had not heard her question: "Isn't it really useful?" He was too busy watching her. But she misread his silence and her face fell.

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"Oh, dear!" she sighed, "and I thought I had been so clever to pick it out."

He recovered himself with a start.

"It's splendid!" he said. "The finest thing in the world for a man like that who has to carry a lot of keys." And suddenly he loved her adorable simplicity and the earnest preoccupation of her knit brows.

She brightened at his words of eager assurance; and together they started to climb the long grade of the hill between Whitridge and the cottage.

They left the village and its lights behind. On all sides of them were the long, blank, snow-clouded fields seeming to light with their own still white splendour the surrounding country. There was the faint crunching of their feet on the hard snow. Mark did not speak, but his heart was singing: "Noël! Noël!" the song his mother sang occasionally in the dim drawing-room of the rectory. "Noël! Noël!" the words seemed to express all that the rapture of the moment made him feel. He did not think of the words as anything definite in themselves. It was all part of the winter twilight, of the lights and the holly wreaths in the Whitridge windows, of the singing joy of youth, and of Marian walking so sedately beside him. And above all was the spirit of Christmas.

It was still not quite dark. Looking out over the long white fields, their fences and hedges sharply outlined in black, they could see the lights of the cottage twinkling mistily. The damp air clung to their lips; there was a moist, sweet, coolness all about them, the coolness of a winter evening. The road grew steeper; and as they neared the cottage they could hear the distant booming of the sea.

Outside the gate of the drive they paused. Mark felt

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his heart suddenly beating in an odd, rather terrifying way. He looked at Marian. She had taken the toy, the jumping jack, from his arms and was holding out her hand for the other packages.

"Marian," he said suddenly, "there's something I want to say to you."

"Yes, Mark?"

She looked up at him, a perplexed little smile trembling on her lips. His manner was rather odd. She remembered in a flash how, the last time she had been with him, he had asked to kiss her—or almost asked. Was he going to do that again, now? She flushed and quivered slightly. Mark felt rather than saw her apprehension.

"I—I know you'll think me a fool," he began awkwardly. "I suppose I am one, only no one would think I was because of my *wanting* to say this to you; only because I am saying it. I—I expect you've guessed before now, Marian, that I—that I care for you. A lot, I mean—the way people do when they want to get married. Would you do that—marry me, dear—some time?"

He paused; and as once before in this same place she replied:

"I can't, Mark, I can't, truly!" She felt horribly embarrassed.

Mark was conciliatory. "Oh, I don't mean right now, dear. I mean later—years later. We're both awfully young, really. I just mean I wish you'd think about its happening some time."

"I couldn't, Mark. I know I couldn't ever!"

"You seem pretty sure," he said ruefully.

"Yes, I am."

He looked at the troubled little face gazing up at his in such serious distress; and all at once he wanted to com-

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fort her rather than himself. He felt, quixotically, as if he had been unkind. He hadn't meant to hurt her.

"Never mind, dear," he said gently. "We'll forget what I said, though I don't mind telling you I'll come back later, after I'm through college. Maybe you'll listen to me then."

"I'll always listen to you, Mark."

He smiled.

"Well, maybe then you'll do what I ask."

She shook her head doubtfully. "I'm afraid not, Mark."

"I'll chance it," he said. "But, Marian, promise me, at least, that you won't get engaged to any one else without letting me know."

Her colour deepened suddenly. Even in the half darkness he could see it.

"I'm not engaged, Mark."

"No, I didn't think you were. Well, don't give any one the chance you wouldn't give me—at least to tell you how I feel. That's all right then. I don't want you to promise anything more. We'll forget for the present that I've spoken. Good-bye, dear; and don't worry."

"Good-bye, Mark."

She went up the snow-covered drive towards the twinkling lights of the cottage, and Mark turned and strode manfully back towards Whitridge; but for both of them some of the cheerfulness was gone from the day.

2

The new year came and went, slipping almost imperceptibly from winter into spring, from spring to summer. June came and passed, and summer ripened thoughtfully to a luscious autumn and still Donald Candler remained away from Whitridge.

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Marian heard of him from time to time, stray mention of him from the lips of gossiping villagers. He and his mother were travelling in France; he and his father had gone to Montana to look at some mines in which the Colonel was interested; he was manging the football team again this year at college; it was rumoured that he was amazingly popular and much in demand at social functions. He would be home, doubtless, for this or that occasion; nevertheless, he stayed away.

The whole year and another one following slipped by. Marian saw Mark during various vacations and visits home; but he was never in Whitridge for long and they were not so much together as formerly. They were still friends, but the memory of that scene in the snow outside the cottage gate remained as a barrier to their old intimacy, try as they would to overcome it. On the Christmas following, Mark, as well as Donald, remained away.

So the years passed. Marian finished her schooling at the old ivy-covered "Academy" in Thornton whither she had gone from old Mr. Horner's patient tutelage. In the spring and fall she rode thither on her bicycle. When the weather grew too cold for that, Ted drove her in behind one of the trotters. A jingle of sleigh bells, a flurry of snow, a wave of Ted's whip, and the cutter was off. She loved the long crisp drives in the cool mornings; or, later in the season, when the cutter was changed for the neat little buggy, seated close beside Ted, it was fun to listen to the click of the horses' hoofs as they dashed up the hill past the entrance to the Hall. Always in her mind was the unspoken thought, "Some day we may meet him coming down. Some day he'll be here again."

So her school days passed, happy in the main. She was good at athletics and enjoyed a small local fame for

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her prowess therein. The other girls were kind to her. She made friends; but unlike most girls, no one particular friend to be singled out as a recipient of confidences or an object of passionate adoration. In this respect she remained supremely aloof.

And such friends as she had made she saw seldom after she left school. Instead of running frequently in to Thornton, she busied herself at home with the house-keeping. There were many improvements to be made along this line in the cottage below the hill. Elaine Pritchard had no aptitude for the making of a home, even under the best of circumstances. As it was, the cottage offered a wide field for Marian's endeavours. Her mother and Ted accepted the innovations with a certain indefinite satisfaction mixed with a mild surprise. Elaine declared that she had no idea Marian would turn out so capable. Ted occasionally wondered why they had never thought of such and such a thing before. But for the most part they both accepted Marian's ministrations as a matter of course. It did not occur to Elaine Pritchard to enquire into the state of her daughter's mind at this time, to ascertain whether or not she was happy, whether or not there might be problems which she could help her solve.

3

On a day about a year after her graduation from Thornton Academy, Marian went to pay a call on old Mr. Horner. He had been for several generations teacher of the grammar school in Whitridge, but within the last year had retired, and lived with his married daughter and her family in a little cottage close to the Tonomet road.

The house itself, a tiny affair of brown, weather-stained shingles, was almost hidden from the road by masses of stocks, marigolds and hollyhocks all bravely

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blooming. It appeared to be literally buried in bloom. For, where the ordinary gardener could bring one flower to bear, dozens blossomed for the painstaking old man who appeared to have an equal facility in the handling of young plants as of young persons. His pupils always loved him and his success as a schoolmaster was a well-known local fact.

Marian on this bright June day was careful to pluck a neat little bouquet of their own flowers to take him, although she was well aware of the wealth of flowers in the midst of which he lived; but she knew that of all gifts this would be the most acceptable. It was a long time since she had been to see him and she had heard that he was ailing of late. She thought to herself how very old he must be—perhaps seventy or more. It would be a kind thing to visit him.

She found him sitting on the steps of his little tumble-down porch sorting seeds from a box before him. His grandchild, now a little girl of four, was playing on the stones below.

Marian stopped to speak to the child who paused a moment, long enough to gravely consider their guest, then continued her earnest playing. Marian went on up the steps and seated herself by the old man's side. He had partly risen at her approach but she motioned him not to move.

He thanked her, complaining of a touch of rheumatism in the back, and gravely pushed aside his box to make room for her on the steps. He was a small, wizened little man with a deprecating expression and a certain soft gentleness of manner which gave an almost womanly twist to his character without his being in the least effeminate, nevertheless.

He accepted her tribute of flowers with a gracious

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smile, and taking in his hands one of the blue delphinium blossoms, called her attention to the delicate workmanship of its petals, the highly decorative outline, the soft shading of the rich colour. Marian listened eagerly. He seemed always to have some new light to throw on a subject however trite or commonplace, some little point to call the attention to that others would overlook. His language was as simple as a child's and yet his knowledge was great. No one could hear him speak without at once realising that.

They had talked for some time and at last Marian rose to go. The child, playing now down by the gate, turned suddenly and ran swiftly towards them, too swiftly; for on the uneven paving stones she stumbled and fell.

Immediately howls rent the air. Marian hastened to her side and had the child upon her feet before old Mr. Horner, moving with some difficulty, joined them. A rapid survey of the damage showed only minor scratches. Convinced of this fact the child's sobs gradually subsided.

Smiling a little, old Mr. Horner turned to his guest. "My dear Marian," he said, "it is a strange thing in life to observe how in early years one's emotion is entirely disproportionate to the circumstances. It changes gradually all through life. As your troubles grow greater you cry less."

As your troubles grow greater you cry less; they were words she was to remember always.

Marian looked at her host with a sudden new interest. Somehow she had never thought of him as having troubles. He was too commonplace, too unromantic, his life too meagre; and yet now, all at once, she saw that it is not the material surroundings of a man that make or unmake his general disposition, but only the individual-

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ity—that thing apart which daily guides and interprets his actions. To such a one there may be romance in the budding of a flower, companionship in the running of a stream, and the delight of all creation in the swift flight of birds. She felt a new respect for the man before her and a sudden new awe of life itself as she now saw it. Ah! it was all very mystical and wonderful.

Perhaps old Mr. Horner guessed something of what was passing in her mind. He looked at her with eyes a little vague and troubled.

“You’re not doing anything now, Marian? Not thinking of working or studying at anything?”

She shook her head. “Just housekeeping for the present.”

“That may not satisfy you always, my dear.”

“No, I know. But it keeps me pretty busy. And I ride a great deal.”

“Good!” he said. “That’s good for you. Keep what pleasures you can from your youth. They help. You mustn’t expect too much from life, you know, or you’re liable to be disappointed; yet you must always be ready to find happiness in everything—even housekeeping.”

They both smiled, and Marian held out her hand.

“I must go now, Mr. Horner. Thank you for my nice talk.”

“And you, my dear child, I am grateful to you for your kindness in coming. And for the flowers.”

He walked with her to the gate and there watched her until she disappeared down the road.

He shook his head reflectively as he followed her retreating figure with his eyes.

“Poor little girl! I’m afraid she has a hard road ahead of her. A lovely girl! Too bad, too bad!”

He went back to the sorting of his seeds.

CHAPTER IX

I

MARIAN, after she left Mr. Horner's house, walked back along the Tonomet road and through Whitridge's main street.

It was shady in the village. The elm trees bordering the road grew close together all along the street. The warm yellow sunlight filtered through their leaves, making fanciful patterns on the dull brick pavements and the dirt paths beyond.

Quiet, like a thick blanket, hung over the houses, that peculiar hush, remote and indescribable, which is the distinct attribute of a village street in the depth of a summer afternoon. From time to time a cock crowed tentatively. Some children at play in a field behind the village shouted now and again, but their fresh young voices came dulled by distance to a pleasant monotone. Otherwise all was silent. No sound came from the blacksmith shop at the end of the street, and when she passed it, Marian saw that the place was empty, although the doors were wide open. By Mrs. Jerrold's, the hotel keeper's, one old man sat out on the lawn, under the trees, reading a paper. From time to time he spat reflectively. No other human being was visible.

Marian went to the end of the street and turned sharply at Pennyman's corner. Whitridge clusters rather closely about its main street and there were few houses here. She turned into the half lane and half side street which was

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her direct route to the cottage, and came face to face with Donald Callender.

Marian paused with a little gasp of astonishment. Suddenly her knees felt weak and shaky beneath her. She fancied that she had grown suddenly pale. All strength seemed to leave her body; the earth reeled dizzily.

Donald did not appear at all affected by the encounter. He answered her quick, startled, "Donald!" with a smile and stretched-out hand.

"Marian Pritchard!" he exclaimed.

She took his hand and suddenly felt the world come back to normal again.

"When did you come? I didn't know you were back. How long have you been here?"

"Only since yesterday. We came last night. Mother and father and Connie Leveredge—you remember her, don't you?—and myself. We're here for a little while, anyway, I don't know how long. We've no particular plans for the present. Connie's people have gone abroad and so she's with us for the time being, has been for a month or so. And how have you been?"

"Oh, all right." Marian waved aside the question of her own health. "But it's so long since you've been here—since that dance and all—" She coloured violently and continued hastily, "I've wondered where you were, and why you didn't come home. Why, it's years since we've seen one another!" She felt that her words were terribly inept.

In the silence that followed her quick, eager sentence, Donald looked at her more closely.

She was pretty, he decided. In the two years since he had seen her she had improved wonderfully. He could not tell exactly how or where, but she was certainly different. But she was still a good deal of a child. Don-

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ald, fresh from prom week and numerous social successes, was in a mood for conquests. He accepted her naïve homage with a fine grace. It rather amused him that she should be so obviously "mashed" on him, amused him, but did not appear to him in any way extraordinary. He felt for her a kindly tolerance. And, after all, there weren't many girls in Whitridge or Thornton.

He detained her a moment while he ran into Pennyman's store, and then joining her, walked back with her in the direction of the cottage.

At the gate they parted. . . .

"You'll come then?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You'll know the way all right, and you won't forget?"

"Oh, no. I won't forget."

"And you'll remember to say nothing about it?"

She hesitated an instant; then shook her head in the affirmative.

"All right. I'll see you later then. You're sure you're not afraid?"

"Oh, no."

She watched him go on up the hill towards the Hall.

2

Marian slipped out from the house and walked rapidly down the path to the gate. The first turn shut the lights of the cottage from her view and she was alone in the soft, dark night.

On all sides of her the air breathed perfume; powerfully sweet, the roses in the garden flung their fragrance abroad. It was like leaving a room heavy with incense to escape from it.

A sky delicately powdered with stars arched overhead. A faint, vague whiteness over the tree tops preluded the

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rising moon. Already, although not yet visible over the thick clustered trees of the paddock, it was touching the highest gable of the stables with a patch of light.

Marian glanced at it absently. There was a breathlessness, a rapt preoccupation about her. She was thinking, wondering how many other girls on this moon-white night were hurrying to meet their lovers.

In the hedge as she passed a cricket sounded an insistent note over and over. It throbbed in her ears like some strange tom-tom summoning to mad adventure. She could hear it still, long after she had left the hedge where the cricket was hidden, behind—hear it still throbbing in her ears. A strange excitement trembled in her blood. And yet she was not in the least afraid.

Down the long road towards the sea she sped. In the distance now, faintly gleaming, were the lights of the life-saving station and the cottages of the coast guards below. The road dipped again, shorewards, and she lost sight of them. A cloud slipped across the moon blurring for a moment its wild whiteness. The stars winked at her as she ran, hastening onwards.

Past the fringe of Whitridge, lying ghostlike in the moonlight, on down towards the sea, she went, turning off from the road to the church. Her path was over a rough, sandy and deeply rutted road, lonely and desolate, but she knew the way between the tall dunes rising menacingly on either hand with the long stretch of the salt marshes ahead. She could have kept the road without difficulty even were the night not so white and lovely.

She could smell the sea now, salt and sweet. She could see the dim outline of its horizon and hear its voice insistent on the shore. To her left, lizard grey in the darkness, rose the rocky headland which shut off the beach

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where she and Donald had ridden that glad summer day years ago.

She had almost come to the trysting place now. A turn; and like a fairy bridge low across the sky, the twinkling lights of Tonomet dulled in the white glamour of the moon which hung high above the dunes, mistress of her world.

Marian lifted her head and sniffed gladly the odour of the sea. She was in the sandy patch of road that dipped below the dunes and edged the salt marshes. She must go more slowly here or the sand would get inside her slippers. But her feet, eager to meet her lover, would scarcely let her pause in her swift flight. She was breathing a little faster from the exertion of walking in the sand.

She left the road on the farther side of the marsh and struck out straight across the dunes. The long grass, high above her slippers, whipped her unprotected ankles. There were two of these gently rising hills of hard sand before she came to the high dune where he would be waiting for her. Waiting for her! Her heart leapt at the thought and she hurried onward, unheeding the tangled grasses that caught at her skirts like mute hands holding her back—onward till the trysting place was reached.

At first she did not see him, although the light on the dunes was clear and bright. Then he rose and came to meet her. He had been sitting with his hands clasped about his knees, his back against a hummock of grass, gazing out silently at the murmurous moonlit sea. He rose and came to her and took her hand in his.

“So you came! I had a horrible feeling you might not, after all. I’ve been torturing myself with the idea, sitting here waiting. It’s such a long way for you to

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come alone, in the dark. I really ought not to have asked you."

His voice was soft and caressing like the delicate night wind that played about her throat and lifted the strand of golden hair on her forehead.

"I got through sooner than I expected in the village," he continued, "so I was here early. I've been waiting a long time."

"I'm sorry," was all she said. But she gazed at him silently. She looked all pale and fair and golden, like some nereid washed ashore with seaweed in her hair, as she stood there, silent, drenched in the moonlight, her lips slightly parted, her dark eyes glowing, and the long wave of her golden hair a misty cloud above her brow.

Her vague loveliness hushed him suddenly; made him dumb, confused, almost humble.

He stood staring at her; and they were silent for a time, gazing into each other's eyes. Then he drew her to him.

"Come over here. We'll sit down and watch the sea."

He was very gentle. She walked beside him in mute obedience till they reached the hummock of grass. Donald dropped her hand, and threw himself down in the sand, but Marian remained standing, gazing out over the glistening waters where, beyond the lights of Tonomet, the moonlight made a white path over the edge of the world.

Donald looked up at her from his couch in the sand.

"What are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking I ought not to have come," she said slowly.

"Why not?" He rolled over on his side. His assurance was coming back. When he didn't look at her he

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was quite at ease. He knew that he "had a way with women." Young as he was, he was well aware of that, not boastfully or consciously, no more than he was boastfully or consciously aware that, through the chances of fortune, he could, did he desire it, buy in the markets this or that commodity denied by circumstances to many of his fellows. It was his heritage, a part of his birthright, of his place in the world. So was homage from women. It had only been the momentary challenge of her grey eyes that had given him that moment of pause, that instant's consciousness of humility. He was not in the least resentful of the fact; he was only rather mildly surprised.

But his ascendancy over the other sex was largely due to a natural desire to please. He endeavoured now to do so.

"Why oughtn't you to have come?" he asked her again. "You wanted to, didn't you? And I wanted you. So what possible harm can it do?"

"I—I don't know."

She could not take her eyes away from the white path of moonlight. It seemed as if they were moving up it, she and Donald, up the long path, on and on, clear over the earth's edge. She came back to the present with a little shiver of surprise to hear Donald saying:

"Of course you don't. There's really no reason in the world why we shouldn't come out on a night like this to see the moon on the water. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Glorious!" Her hands were clasped on her breast. She stood facing the sea; and the fresh, cool wind blew inland over the water, bending the long dune grasses at her feet and whipping a strand of hair across her cheeks.

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Donald was still looking up at her.

"Do you mean," he said, "that you're not going to sit down beside me?"

"No," she said slowly, "I think I'll go back."

"Indeed you won't!" He sprang to his feet. In the hush of the starshine they were close together.

"Marian," he said, almost sternly, "look at me!"

She turned very slowly, and slowly raised her eyes to his. And suddenly he knew why he had felt that momentary humility and wonderment when he first saw her to-night. He knew that she loved him.

He put out his hands and laid them on her shoulders, and as he did so he felt her whole body trembling. It filled him with a sense of mastery, delicious and quite satisfying.

"Marian," he said softly, "you won't go back until I let you. You won't go back because you love me. Confess it; you do!"

Even in the pale moonlight he could see the waves of dark colour flood her cheeks and her lips tremble. And he wanted to be kind.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "Look at me and tell me."

But she would not look at him.

"But you don't—" she began with downcast eyes.

He finished the sentence for her readily—too readily.

"Love you? Of course I do. You silly little thing, is that all that's troubling you?"

She looked up at him then, her grave eyes wide, unsmiling. "Yes," she said softly, "I love you."

For any man, be he never so unemotional, there is but one thing to do in such a situation. Donald did it. He caught her to him and held her close. So they stood en-

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laced, a black shadow in the moonlight. And like a heart beating in the darkness the sea was beating, beating, on the beach below them.

He drew her down to a seat beside him in the soft sand. He lay at her feet and she smoothed the curls back from his brow. Below them the sea pounded at the beach. She kept her eyes fixed on the white moon path, and all the time she was trying to hold the minutes fast. She was thinking: "This is what I have lived for all these years; this is what Life means."

Donald caught her hand and pressed it between his lips and the cool, soft, yielding sand.

"Oh, you darling!" he said, "you darling!"

He looked up at her. In the cool radiance of the moonlight her face was very pale and strangely transfigured, and again there stirred in him that sensation of having looked at something mystical, so that the words he had been planning to say died in his throat. He was only aware of the soft white purity of her loveliness. That intangible mantle of innocence that he had noticed long ago was about her again, even with the light of love in her eyes, protecting, shielding her. Unconsciously he let the opportunity slip from him. Soft as the wind's whisper the moth-grey night glided by. Only the sea beat ever on the shore like a heart beating.

"You don't mind my kissing you like this?" he asked after a long silence.

She shook her head. "No, not now—after to-night. And after what happened that night at your dance, I—I suppose it's all right."

Donald was mystified. "What the deuce," he thought, "is she speaking of?" Aloud he said:

"What's the use of thinking about anything but to-night?"

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She turned gravely startled eyes upon him. "But don't you think it does make a difference? Why, I wouldn't have come here at all to-night otherwise."

Donald sat up. "Doesn't what make a difference?"

"What—what you did that night."

"But what did I do?"

She drew away from him suddenly. He felt, rather than saw, the hurt surprise in her eyes.

"Then you don't even remember?"

Donald thought furiously. In his emergency he reached for her hand again and she snatched it away. Her cheeks were blazing. All at once light broke in on him. He must have kissed her. He didn't remember the occurrence now, but that must have been it. He had kissed her as a kid and she had remembered and treasured it all these years!

He leaned over and caught her hand.

"I was only teasing you. Of course I remember. Did you think I could forget a thing like that? You came to-night because I had kissed you before. You knew it was all right because of that."

She yielded then to his embraces. They sat together, his arms about her shoulders, harkening to the swirling waters far down the beach and the soft lisping call of the sea wind, their eyes drinking in the mystic loveliness of the night, hands enlaced, silent, in the old, immemorial manner of lovers. Immersed in dear, delicious dreams and shadowy illusions they let the hours slip by, speaking little; the gossiping night wind heard only from time to time Marian's low-murmured: "Donald! Donald!" and the sound of their young lips meeting in swift, impassioned kisses. Even the sea was silenced to a gentle monotone, that strange unearthly quiet that preceds the turning of the tide. Nothing came to disturb their perfect

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ecstasy; only the night wind sighed a little among the dunes, and the white moonlight path upon the sea deepened and quivered with a vague unrest.

When the lean waves were creeping stealthily higher and higher up the smooth white plain of the beach, Donald and Marion at last rose to go home. Together, hand in hand, past the long hunched backs of the dunes, through the soft, shuffling sand and along the edge of the salt marshes, leaving behind them the lights of Tonomet steadily gleaming, a fairy arch in the sky.

They heard the wind sighing in the reeds, and the call of a waking bird somewhere in the darkness. A single light was burning in the life-saving station, but the cottagers' lights had all been put out.

At her own gate, in the darkness, Donald stooped and kissed her again. "Good night, and God bless you!" he whispered softly. She waved her hand to him; flitted from him like a white moth up the drive to the house.

As she got into bed that night and nestled between the cool, sweet sheets a queer thought occurred to her, an odd thought to come to a girl supremely happy. What she thought was, "Whatever else life can do to me, I've had to-night. It can't take away that; that's mine forever and ever!"

3

Donald, when he reached home after leaving Marian at her gate, paused in the drive before the house to light a cigarette. He hadn't thought of smoking before. Odd that he shouldn't have felt the need for it.

Still holding the cigarette between his lips, he entered the house, using his latchkey for the purpose; and turning to the right from the hall, he passed into the library where one softly shaded light still burned at the far end.

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Under this light, curled up in the corner of the sofa, Connie Leveredge was sitting, an open book on her lap. The rosy light from overhead shone down upon her dark, glossy hair, and cast a warm hue over her face and bare arms. She made a pretty picture in the shadowy room.

Donald walked quietly up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Out so late?" she said carelessly, without looking up.

Subconsciously Donald felt slightly piqued at her indifference. His pulses were still throbbing with the remembrance of Marian's kisses. And Connie looked so cool and crisp and unruffled there under the rosy light; the curve of her neck so smooth and white, with the hair above it so immaculately arranged. Her obviously complete perfection somehow teased and annoyed him. He felt that he wanted amazingly to see her dishevelled, as if he would like to rumple her with his hands.

"Where's mother?" he asked inconsequentially.

"Gone to bed." Connie snapped the book shut suddenly. "And your father, too. It's very late, young man; you don't seem to realise that."

She had turned now, although she had not put her feet down on the floor yet. She crouched there in her corner of the sofa and looked up at him, a provocative questioning in her eyes.

Donald felt his pulses leap again; and the sea wind from the dunes was still singing in his ears. His mood was one of daring. Connie was no pale ghost girl wavering under the unsteady light of a misty moon; Connie was real flesh and blood, maddeningly vital. Besides, she was well able to take care of herself. Why not give rein to that wild impulse to seize hold of her. . . .

On a sudden he reached forward and caught hold of her, dragging her to her feet and along the sofa towards

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him. Connie, startled, tried to pull away, but he held her fast; his hands gripping her shoulders, forced her arms against her body, hurting her. An angry flush mounted to her forehead. She cried out:

"Donald, don't! You're hurting me!"

But the sea wind seemed to have made him doubly strong. He held her fast, although he loosened his grip a little; and he pressed his lips to hers.

"Donald, you're a brute!" She wrenched herself free at last; standing back from him, nursing her wrists and smoothing a lock of hair which had become disarranged.

"I don't see what right you have to act like that," she said petulantly.

"Then why did you look at me as you did?"

"How do you mean? You spoke to me; I suppose I had to look at you to answer!"

"You didn't have to look like that."

"Bother!" The ghost of a little smile crept into Connie's eyes. "What makes you think I cared about looking at you at all?"

Donald laughed. He guessed that Connie was over her "mad."

"You shouldn't look so temptingly delicious and at the same time so immaculately proper. It's too much for a man's self-restraint. I wasn't responsible."

She was standing away from the immediate aureate glow of the light now. In the cool shadow of the vast room her face had lost its rosy glint. But the light struck upon her bosom, still heaving from her recent indignation. She was very charming, small and lithe and graceful, rather like a soft silky cat. Something feline in her make-up showed momentarily and checked the mad impulse born an instant ago in his mind. Perhaps Connie saw it.

"Why did you want to do it?" she asked again.

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But Donald's wild mood had left him.

"Oh, nothing," he said carelessly as he turned away.

Connie bit her lip; and as Donald, with an idle "good night," left her at the foot of the stairs, he did not see that she had the nails of her fingers pressed tightly into the palms of her hands.

CHAPTER X

I

IT WAS something of a shock to Marian to learn several days later that Donald had gone away again and probably would not return to Whitridge before going back to college in the fall. She had not seen him in the meantime, not since that last whispered "good night, and God bless you!" at the gate in the pale starlight. To leave after that for several months at least without even the formality of saying good-bye seemed unkind, more than that, cruel. Marian was at a loss to understand it. It had seemed so certain that she must see him in a day or so. She had wanted to see him, desired it incredibly, and at the same time she wanted not to see him—at least, not just yet. A timid dread of meeting him had kept her in the whole day following that evening on the dunes. She had wanted for a time to rest, as it were, upon her happiness, as a swimmer will pause to float for a moment on the waves, that he may the better enjoy the new, strong joy of swift, keen motion to come. No doubts assailed her. All her youth she had dreamed that some time this thing would come to her. The colour of romance such as this had tinged all her youthful fancies. And now it was come, just as she had dreamed of it, only more wonderful! more beautiful! She was content to take the future slowly.

But now that he was gone so suddenly, so unexpectedly, she reproached herself. Why had she dreaded so to meet

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him? Why had she indulged in such absurd shyness? Why let such timid fancies take hold upon her? It was as if she had said: "Slowly, come slowly; it is more than my heart can bear all at once." That idea had seemed reasonable at the time; but looking back she felt that perhaps by that very diffidence she had missed seeing him. Perhaps he had looked for her. No doubt he, too, felt shy, and hadn't wanted to come to the house. She should have gone at least halfway to meet him. It was her own fault, she told herself severely.

And yet she couldn't help feeling that he should, in any case, have come to her, have sent her some word. To learn as she did, through a chance call on Mrs. Wetherell, that he had gone away on a visit, first at Connie Leveredge's and then for other visits, and that so soon as the Thursday following their evening on the dunes, was a bitter disappointment.

But her faith was strong. Nothing could daunt her trust in Donald or shake her conviction that the course of their love would run smoothly. And she had the memory of that night on the dunes to stay and comfort her. And then a little less than a week after he had gone came his letter. It was rather short:

"Dear Marian [it ran] Well, I'm back here at Singley Park with the Leveredges and it's most frightfully dull. Nothing at all to do but ride about in a stupid motor car and call on the neighbours. Then you go home and wait for them to call on you. I'm going from here to visit Jack Tenniel. We expect to have a great time. He has a boat, something rather nifty from the description he's given me. I wish you were going to be there, too. We could have no end of a good time. I don't know whether Connie's going or not. Tenniel wants her to come but

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she thinks maybe she won't—I don't know why. It's great sport sailing, don't you think? Or haven't you done any? We'll have a great time some day, you and I. For if I like Tenniel's boat I mean to have one, too. Don't know where I'd keep it, though. Well, never mind about that now. I must stop. I was awfully sorry not to see you again before I left. Don't think I've forgotten you! I haven't. Connie sends her love—or at least she would if she knew I was writing to you. I'll see you before very long. So good-bye.

“DONALD.”

That was the letter. There was no hint of love-making in it; not even any word to distinguish it from the epistle of the most commonplace of friends; yet to Marian it breathed a passion more intoxicating, a romance more exquisite, than any vows of deathless love writ in fire and blood!

She read the brief note over time after time, scanning each line and letter, each scrawling flourish of the address, the postmark even, and the stamp, until she could close her eyes and still see it plain before her. No other letter that she could ever receive in all her life after would affect her quite as that dull, schoolboyish, hastily written note of Donald's did. She carried it about with her and read it at odd moments, at night in the curtained recesses of her bedroom, in the crisp pale dawns as soon as the thin grey light permitted; or, Nance saddled and bridled and the solitary miles between her and the house, drawing it from within her blouse to reread it, hungrily, joyfully.

And Nance, walking slowly, would guide them both along the narrow roads and over the trackless wastes of firm white sand, between the dunes where the coarse,

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tangled grasses grew, along all the roads which she and Donald had travelled together.

Marian lived in a world of rapt, ecstatic dreams at this time. She could almost regret that they had come so far along the road of emotional experience. It lay all before her, rosy with the first dawning mists of romance, sweet with the dewy fragrance of undoubting faith, glorious with the unfamiliar joy of possession. She no more doubted Donald than she would have doubted herself. It did not even occur to her to criticise his letter.

She did not answer it at once. Instead she let several days, almost a week, go by. She wanted to wait that long because the pleasure of composing a reply would be so great. All sorts of clever things came rushing into her mind whenever she thought of it. But in the end the letter which she sent was very simple. No slightest mention in it of the ardent love which burned in her breast like a pure flame. Only she kissed the letter before she sealed it because his hands would touch it.

After that first exchange of correspondence there were numerous letters; but while she loved them and looked forward with a joyful eagerness to their coming, there was none of them quite like that first one to her. It remained, crumpled and worn with many readings, the prize jewel of her possession.

One day she had ridden out towards Tonomet, meaning to take the sea road back past the life-saving station and the church, but in the lane just beyond Mr. Horner's house she came face to face with a motor containing Mrs. Callender and, beside her, Connie Leveredge.

Nance was well used to motors, there was no reason why she should have noticed it at all; but either through the suddenness of its approach, or because of the narrow road, she took it into her head to feign fright, and danced

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excitedly. The chauffeur considerably stopped the car; Marian, smiling, brought the mare under control and endeavoured to walk her past the waiting motor, when Connie, with a hurried direction to the man to delay starting, leaned out and addressed the girl on horseback.

Connie was wearing a soft, clinging dress of some silky grey material, and a small grey hat with a long drooping plume. It was an inappropriate but extremely becoming costume. She looked like some charming, old-fashioned portrait. Her colour was high and her dark eyes danced. Her smile was very pleasant.

"How are you?" she called. "I'm visiting Aunt Clara for a bit while the men are away. Donald's coming home next week. Did you know it? I wish you'd come up to see me. How about to-morrow? Can't you run up then? Aunt Clara's going in to Thornton to a party and I shall be all alone. Do come."

Marian felt a slight twinge of embarrassment at Connie's effusiveness. Mrs. Callender, meanwhile, sat by with an air of icy indifference. Marian felt a subtle dislike for her. She knew now that she had always felt it, only she had not realised it until to-day.

But Connie had said specially that she would not have to see the mistress of the Hall if she came on the morrow. She hesitated an instant and then told Connie she would come.

2

On the morrow, however, she felt unreasonably averse to going; a return of that shyness which she had constantly to combat, and a shrinking from Connie's bright, inquisitive eyes overpowered her. Connie had asked so many questions once before. True, she had been much younger then; but who could tell but that she might be

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even more interested now? What if Connie asked her about Donald and herself? Marian could not countenance the idea.

Providentially in the morning Elaine came down to breakfast complaining of a splitting headache. It grew worse as the day advanced so that she asked Marian to take charge of a pupil that afternoon in her place. Glad of the excuse for not going up to the Hall, Marian wrote Connie a brief note explaining the circumstances and sent it up by Ted around noontime. Connie shrugged her shoulders when she received it, but made no remark.

Marian rode out with her pupil and they went in quite a different direction from the Hall; but during the whole ride Marian's thoughts were there. She was wondering whether Connie had been right when she said that Donald would be home next week. Ah, wonderful, if only it were true! But he had made no mention of it in his letters to herself. But Connie ought to know. Hope began to bloom again in her heart like a delectable flower.

3

Mark came home a few days later and at once made his way to the cottage. Marian was unfeignedly glad to see him, although she could not suppress the unfriendly little thought of how much gladder she would have been had it been Donald.

He suggested a walk; Marian was glad of the exercise, and they started out down the main road to Thornton. It had been raining hard for two days and this was the only one fit to walk on at present. Everything was still wet and dripping, but the thick curtain of grey clouds had broken at last. In the direction of the sea a wide band of pale, greenish-yellow light hung motionless. Low overhead thin wispy masses of vapour, like

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blown smoke, floated rapidly along, borne on invisible breezes, transparent against the background of iron-grey. The long black macadam of the road stretched ahead of them, with here and there purple pools, dull, with only the faintest glimmer of reflected light from the dun sky overhead.

But in the fresh wind everything was clearing rapidly. Mark was in high spirits. They strode along side by side, Marian matching her steps to his. She had an easy carriage and a long, graceful stride, rather unusual in a woman. Mark was proud of her, and she of him. When a passing motor forced them to the side of the road, back from the puddles, making it necessary to go single file, she looked at him walking ahead, and vaguely admired the square set of his shoulders and the way he held his head, courageously.

They walked almost to Thornton, as far as the well-laid-out squares and streets of what was to have been an important suburb of the town. But Thornton had not grown as the promoters of the scheme expected, or, if it had, had advanced in another direction. The admirably planned streets had been allowed gradually to revert to their original state; grass grew in the roads and the pavements here and there were quite grown over. Their outlines were still visible, with now and then a dilapidated signboard bearing an unfamiliar street name, and a brave array of bent and twisted street lamps. In remote spots, like islands in the surrounding sea of desolation, stood, here and there, houses, tall, angular, unattractive, bought by some too credulous investor years ago and slowly deteriorating.

Marian and Mark stood still upon a deserted street corner and silently regarded this scene. In the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun which by now had broken

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through the dingy grey clouds, a certain mood of rather wistful romance animated the flat expanse before them. The watery sunlight gleamed wanly from the house roofs; the bleak lines of half-formed streets cutting one another at regular angles took on a sudden misty loveliness—something that had to do with youth and young love and brave endeavour, with youth's extravagant hopes and ambitions, the ineffable sweet pathos of joys and sorrows shared in common when two young things play at life together as children play "house" with their dolls.

Mark was the first to speak, and something of this reading of the scene must have crept into his consciousness.

"Up nearer the town it isn't so bad," he said. "In fact, there are some quite nice little houses. They sell them out on monthly payments, the lots, I mean, quite cheap. It wouldn't take a great deal to put up a house, one of those new little cottages. In fact, it wouldn't be so bad out here once they got started. All they need is for a few more people to build. They're rather like sheep, you know, people are. If you could only once get them started, I think they'd come fast enough, even way out here."

"I rather like its loneliness," Marian replied. "I hate houses crowded together."

"Do you?" Mark's tone was eager. "So do I. Do you know, I've been thinking of trying to get something to do in Thornton. It was to be the law if I could spare the time. Judge Phillips will take me in his office if I choose, but I don't know. If I could get something else, quicker—Marian, if you would, we might get married and build a little house, all for ourselves in some inexpensive part—not here, perhaps, that's too desolate—but somewhere—" He broke off at Marian's little gesture of pain and regret.

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"Oh, Mark! Please! I thought we weren't to speak of that again. I thought it was understood. . . ."

"We haven't for a long time now."

"I know; and I was so glad. I thought you had forgotten; that you'd got over caring for me—that way."

He smiled ever so ruefully. "Got over it! You speak as if love were the measles! No, dear, I haven't got over it—not at all; and I never shall, even though we both live to be a hundred and eighty. I shall always think of you and love you just as I do now."

"But, Mark, you mustn't. You must stop loving me, then."

"I can't stop, dear. You've bewitched me. Long ago, before ever the world began, you cast an evil spell over me. I'm the poor enchanted fool following the will-o'-the-wisp! I've listened to the fairies singing; and it's a well-known fact that those who once do that have lost their souls forever—they're never able to come back, never are normal again! That's history."

His words were playful, but for all their bantering quaintness his smile was sad.

She smiled, too, but gravely, regretfully.

"If only you'd be sensible about it. If only you'd try to overcome it!"

"Ah, but I can't! The mischief's done—always was done. You can't undo it. But then, you know, they never really regret it, those who have heard the fairies singing."

"It is I who regret."

"Why do that? Oh, Marian dear, be a little generous! Marian, it isn't only for to-day that I want you. Don't you see, when you refuse me, it's as if you took all my past away from me as well—all the old happy visions? I've always thought of you, always loved you just as I

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do now. Somehow, in spite of everything, I've always felt you would be my wife. Even when we were still children I know I had some such conviction—"

"But we aren't children any more, Mark." Her eyes were very grave and serious. "If you'd only remember that you'd find it easy to forget."

"No, I won't, Marian. I'll look up in dying and see your face—I know I shall! You think that's sentimental and foolish, don't you? If you weren't so kind-hearted I believe you'd laugh at me!"

"No, no, Mark!"

"All the same, it's the way I feel."

"Mark dear, please—!"

She raised her clear grey eyes to his and he saw that she was genuinely distressed.

"I won't bother you any more," he said smiling, "but I can't help hoping that some day you'll feel differently. I can't risk letting my chances of happiness go by without at any rate trying. As long as there isn't any one else; there isn't, is there, Marian?"

She coloured furiously so that he said hastily: "No, never mind answering that; I don't want to know if there is. We won't talk about it any more, now, although I think it's only fair to tell you I shan't ever give up hope."

With a smile half sad, half tender, she turned and he followed her. The afternoon was far advanced as they turned their faces in the direction of Whitridge. The misty day had sunk into a grey twilight by the time they were approaching the Callender hill, which, from this side, rose steeply like a giant ant heap with the side crumbled off. Mark called Marian's attention to a small column of smoke rising steadily from behind the trees on the crest of the hill.

"Look, Marian, at that smoke. It looks like a fire."

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"Perhaps it is. That's down towards the stables. You don't suppose it *is* the stables?" she added after a moment.

The nearer they approached, the higher rose that indefinite column of smoke. The two on the road watched it anxiously. By the time they were within a quarter mile of the lower gate there could be no doubt about it; the fire was in the stables. Mark turned to the girl.

"It's the stables and the place is pretty far out for the Whitridge fire horses to come. They'll need help. Let's hurry."

They raced along the intervening distance. Marian felt her heart beating tumultuously. Donald's house and Donald's horses in danger! She felt a wild thrill of horror at the thought, and a new strange excitement, not unpleasant. Even in the midst of it, it frightened her, that feeling. It couldn't be that she was glad such a thing could happen.

"Come on, hurry up!" Mark stretched out a hand to her as he spoke.

They had reached the lower gate now and were soon pushing up the drive. By now they could see an occasional tongue of flame shoot up through the thick belching clouds of smoke, lost again in an instant, only to leap up elsewhere a moment later. There could be no doubt about it now, the stables, the much revered Callender stables, were on fire.

The driveway up to the house from the Thornton Road was much steeper than the one from the Whitridge side. It wound in a series of sharp curves up to, and past, the barns, so that, as they advanced, they lost sight of the smoke clouds. The wind was in the opposite direction; as yet they could not smell the fire; but in the drive, as they mounted, they came upon groups of people, all likewise hurrying to the scene.

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Marian and Mark were both out of breath and panting when they finally came within sight of the burning buildings and the crowd of people surrounding them as close as the danger permitted. They could see the destruction going on, now that they were beyond the intervening barrier of trees. "Oh, Mark!" the girl exclaimed in horror as they drew near.

The long, rambling structure of the stables was apparently a mass of flames. Sparks, like flocks of birds, flew upward with a strange hissing sound. The heavy white and yellow smoke, ever increasing in volume, poured out of every door and aperture. Before this scene the crowd, which was being constantly augmented from the other side of the hill, swayed and muttered.

Most of the people were from Whitridge; Marian recognised them here and there—old Jerrold from the hotel, and Mrs. Jerrold, perspiring and panting painfully; Mr. Horner's daughter and her husband; Smith from the general store; and Pennyman, the druggist. An air of suppressed excitement and obscure enjoyment animated these people, too. Marian felt it as soon as she was among them. Murmurs of conversation reached her:

"They're doomed! . . . There's no hope for them now . . . What a shame! . . . Isn't it now?"

"Yes, they're doomed." The first man repeated his verdict in a tone of equivocal regret. It was as if the words gave him a peculiar pleasure to repeat.

"What are?" Mark, also, had heard the speaker and turned quickly. "Do you mean the barns?"

"No, sir! The horses, that's what I mean. They're all in there yet. Not a one of them's been got out." There was an unholy relish in the way he said the words. His neighbour spat reflectively.

"Good bit of horseflesh gone."

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The other nodded. They were not unsympathetic men but they enjoyed the excitement.

"But haven't they tried to get them out?" Mark demanded.

"Oh, yes, I dessay." He looked at Marian standing, pale as a statue, behind Mark's shoulder. "But it's always touch and go with horses trapped like that. They don't often manage to get 'em out. Not once the fire's got ahead like this one has. If it hadn't abeen a wet day them barns'd gone like so much tinder. Only reason they've lasted this long is because the roofs were thoroughly soaked. The fire department's no good. Give us a light, Jim," he added to his companion, "my pipe's gone out."

"Plenty of light about," said the other, indicating, with a jerk of his thumb, the blazing buildings; and they both laughed.

"Mark, come away." Marian put her hand on his arm. She was very white.

"Yes. We'll go around to the other side. They may be doing something more around there."

They skirted the edge of the crowd and made their way to the far side of the buildings. Here the crowd was equally dense, but the smoke, driven that way by the wind, kept them at a greater distance from the flames, and made it difficult to see what was going on.

The Whitridge fire department, glorying in the knowledge that chances to distinguish itself like this came but seldom, was fussing about, shouting, ordering and countermanding orders, dragging up pieces of hose which apparently no one had the authority or the wit to connect; in fact, behaving in a thoroughly inefficient manner, a situation which is apt to happen in small, rural communities where fires are infrequent and responsibility unsettled.

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It was years since there had been a conflagration on this scale in the village.

"They say the Thornton fire apparatus has been ordered out," Marian heard one woman remark. "Good work, too. These here men are all off their heads. Look at Jimmy Gallagher there; don't know whether he's coming or going."

One of the firemen, with an assumption of authority, came forward and urged the crowd back. He was wearing an old pair of overalls and a large helmet.

"Now then, now then, move back, can't ye? How can us men do anything if youse all keep butting in? Back, I say, keep back of this here line. Make room for the hose. Now then, this way, boys."

It was Tom Gallagher, Jimmy's brother. Mark called to him eagerly:

"Tom! Tom Gallagher! Is it true that there are horses in there?"

The fireman strolled across to them, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Oh, how do, Mr. Wetherell? You askin' about them horses? Well, now that I can't say. Maybe they've got 'em out and maybe not. They might have got one or two out before the blaze reached this far. It started over there in the garradge— Oh, yes, they run out the car all right before it got regular started—" This in answer to a hasty enquiry from another quarter. He turned back to Mark. "But horses, you know, they're different. They say that horses have been known to let themselves be led right out o' a burnin' building, and then, when they was safe out, what do they do but turn around and run right back again. They stick to their stalls no matter what happens. Horses ain't got no sense. Now I knew a fella once—"

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He had put his foot up on a stump preparatory to a long harangue; but once again Marian pulled at Mark's sleeve.

"Come away. Let's see if we can't get nearer over there by those trees. The men seem to be working there. Perhaps they can tell us something."

They left Tom Gallagher to tell his story to other listeners. In the place which they now sought out, the fire had been raging its fiercest. Hay was stored in this one of the barns, and already the flames had licked up beyond the roof of the building. The interior was gutted beyond hope of recovery. The barn was an old one, built of stout timbers in the days when barns were meant to hold supplies for many a long winter day. For years before the new Callender house was built it had stood there proudly resisting the assaults of time, but now its day was over. Roof and side wall had fallen in, the stark timbers rose gauntly, the heavy crosspiece that had held the gable outlined like a crucifix against the angry red of the sky.

As they stood watching in awed silence, a cry, inhuman and startling, rent the air, a wild cry of fear from one of the trapped horses. Mark saw the girl at his side shudder silently. Her face in the oscillating light of the leaping flames was blanched and drawn.

"Oh, Mark, do something! Can't you do something?" The cry seemed to be wrenched from her.

"I'm afraid it's useless, Marian. But I'll see if I can't get nearer. Stay here; promise me you won't go any nearer and I'll see what I can do."

"Yes, yes." She nodded. "Mark, you know Donald's Prince is in there."

"I know."

He plunged ahead through the clump of trees shrivel-

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ling in the rain of sparks from above, and she lost sight of him in the new, swirling clouds of smoke that drove suddenly towards them.

She tried to pierce the obscurity beyond; but Mark seemed to have disappeared utterly. She could feel the intense heat of the flames on her face now; and the people around her were falling back. A sudden doubt assailed her; had she driven Mark into reckless danger? After all, Prince was only a horse and Mark was Mark. Suppose anything happened to him? Then she recollected that she would have gone herself if he would have let her.

Nevertheless, her anxiety was great. She strained her eyes forward. She was standing almost alone now.

Suddenly from a group a little to her left there rose a faint cheer. She turned enquiringly and saw a man dash through the crowd and rush towards the blazing barns, a man who threw aside his hat and tore off his overcoat as he ran. She felt her heart beat wildly. In the momentary glimpse she had of him she was able to recognise him—Donald Callander!

A moment later she heard his voice clear above the noise and confusion: "Good God! haven't they got my Prince out yet? Damn them!" And then Colonel Callender calling wildly:

"Donald, Donald! come out of that! I say, Donald!"

There was a crash as another part of the roof fell in. Thick, sullen clouds of black smoke issued, shutting out all vision; but in the general darkness excited voices rose all around her.

"Who's that?" . . . "What's he done?" . . . "Is it the Thornton Hose Company?" . . . "No, no, young Callender . . . gone in after his own horse . . . no chance at all . . . absolutely impossible . . . foolhardy . . . always was headstrong . . . got the guts, though

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. . . no good, can't get 'em out, anyway . . . plenty of money to buy another . . . never get horses out in a fire" . . . and so forth.

Marian lived hours in the pause that followed. But when the smoke lifted, thrown back by the west wind, another murmur rustled through the crowd like wind through the corn.

"By George, he's done it! Hanged if he hasn't. Good work, boy!" A feeble cheer fluttered from a dozen throats.

Donald had reappeared leading a snorting, quivering horse with a blanket thrown over his head. Donald's face and hands were entirely untouched and his clothing unscorched; there was not a scratch on him, and he was smiling. For a moment, across the lighted arena, Marian caught a fleeting glimpse of Connie, very white and motionless. Then Donald saw Marian. A groom led away the rescued horse and he crossed at once to her!

"Hello, Marian, you here, too? Well, we got one of them out, anyway. Nice informal reception they're having to greet me home!" His voice was nervous, excited. "I was driving up from the station when I saw the blaze and thought, 'Somebody's jolly old barn is burning.' When we get near enough to see whose it was, maybe we didn't hustle! I say, what are they cheering for?"

"For you. Oh, Donald, that was so wonderful and so foolish of you to rush in like that!"

He stood looking at her. Her face was raised to his; all her love and admiration and hero worship was in her eyes. Donald stared, hesitated a moment, glanced over his shoulder; then he laughed. He saw Mark approaching; there was only a moment then. They were standing somewhat apart from the crowd, secluded behind the clump of trees. He gazed down into Marian's eyes. He saw her

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lips tremble; it seemed a shame not to go on. She really was mad about him, the poor little girl!

"Oh, that wasn't anything," he said. "I knew if I could once get in there that Prince would follow me out all right. It was easy."

It was easy, too, to put his hand on hers in the soft shadow of the trees. He felt the warm, trusting clasp of her fingers. They were both, perhaps, still feeling the nervous tension that the excitement of the scene had produced. As Donald looked at her, in a wave the passionate memory of that night on the shore came back to him. Perhaps, after all, he did actually love her. Who knows? Queerer things than that sometimes happened. For a moment the idea intrigued him.

So engrossed were they that neither of them noticed that Mark had joined them until the Thornton fire chief came forward with outstretched hand.

"That was a wonderful piece of work, Mr. Callender, wonderful! One of the finest rescues I ever saw. I want to congratulate you."

"Thanks," said Donald carelessly. Others came up; crowded about; they looked at Donald with awe. He took his honours easily; but it seemed that he avoided Mark's gaze.

Marian became suddenly aware that Mark's clothing was scorched and that he had wrapped one of his hands in his handkerchief.

"Mark! you're hurt!"

He shook his head. "It's nothing." But he would not take the bandage from his hand.

The fire chief laughed. "Got too near, did you? That's a bad thing to do. Curiosity once killed a cat, you know."

Mark flushed and Donald spoke hurriedly:

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"Come up to the house. We'll celebrate a bit." But Marian shook her head. The fire, practically burnt out by now, had been got under control. They would go home; it was late.

As they went down the hill towards the cottage, hurrying because the daylight was now quite gone, Mark said no word to the girl at his side either of the rescue or of that other thing he had seen there in the shadows back of the burning barn. He had made a discovery and the spirit of self-sacrifice was upon him. Marian must never know the truth of that affair to-night. Even that red-hot inferno into which he had plunged to lead Donald's horse to the comparative safety of the outer barn could not extort the truth from him now. For, in an instant's space, just between pulse and pulse, he had learned Marian's secret. It was easy, glimpsing that look of adoring wonder as she lifted her face to Donald's. Like a sudden blow over the heart had come that moment's insight.

Yet he said no word of his discovery. There was nothing in his manner to indicate how, in one swift flash, all the old dreams and hopes of his youth had been swept away. They talked quietly of indifferent things. A westering moon, a slender sickle, gleamed pale between two clouds. The night was soft and balmy; and there was nothing to tell her in Mark's casual good-bye at the cottage gate that here was more than a commonplace farewell.

CHAPTER XI

I

MARK was alone at the rectory when Donald sought him out on the following day. Donald came on foot, a walking stick in his hand; he was dressed in light sport clothes with knickerbockers and golf stockings, and looked particularly handsome. He brought with him an air of careless ease and well-being which Mark, for all his heavy heart, could not but find refreshing.

Mark himself was looking ill and worn. His hand, which was bandaged and swollen, pained him a good deal. A litter of suit-cases and travelling bags, open and half packed, lay all about him, giving to the room a transitory, uncertain look.

Donald glanced about him in some surprise.

"You're going back again?"

"Yes, to-day."

"Not staying over the week-end?"

"No, I couldn't get a longer vacation."

"What a pity!"

Donald dropped into an easy chair and swung one knee lightly over the other. In spite of a faint self-consciousness in his manner, that indescribable charm which was so characteristic of his lighter moments was unflawed. Mark, as he seated himself opposite, felt for a fleeting instant a recrudescence of that old admiring awe of him

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that he used to feel, a kind of innocent hero worship. He wondered dispassionately if he would ever entirely outgrow this feeling for Donald, or was it part of his nature, the heritage of his youth?

He was not now blind to Donald's faults as he had been then, but the old loyalty and admiration were there still, had ripened into that deep, unalterable affection which men sometimes feel for other men, careless whether or not it is returned. Yet to-day, as he looked at his guest sitting back in his chair, knees crossed negligently, a careless grace in every line of his body, there came to Mark, almost unwillingly, a touch of that old loving envy he had felt in his boyhood. It seemed to him now, as it had then, that Donald possessed everything he himself lacked—money, looks, poise, charm. The sudden recollection of how bewilderingly these qualities in Donald used to overwhelm him in those long-ago days flicked him again with a touch of pain, a moment's bitterness.

He put it from him, however, and listened to Donald's light-running chatter. Donald was making time; he seemed to have some difficulty in approaching his subject, and Mark felt, somehow, that he could do nothing to help him. He had not slept and his mind was confused. There had been moments last night when he had fancied he hated Donald, but this disloyalty he knew could not last. Phrases kept running through his mind; "Greater love than this hath no man known—" Was that what he felt towards Donald? Oh, what folly to put it that way! It was not he who had chosen—given anything up!

It was only the natural result. Donald had always had what he wanted; it was almost an inherent right with him. Why should he not face it? Why keep recalling last night's deception; assuring himself that he, at least, had always played fair? For shame! the thing was of so little

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consequence; would make so little difference in the long run. Last night, perhaps, he might have felt annoyed; to-day it was less than nothing. Only he would go away; he would go away and not come back until he could control himself.

Donald broke off what he was saying with a little incoherent laugh. He leaned forward. "Mark, I'm wondering just what you're thinking of me," he remarked suddenly.

Mark parried the question. "It's of no consequence."

Donald smiled. He did not seem so much embarrassed as amused. "I suppose it's in rotten taste, my coming to you to-day, but—well, you see I couldn't have this thing between us."

"It isn't between us," said Mark.

Donald was looking down, drawing intricate designs on the carpet with the point of his stick. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked after a pause.

"Do? Why nothing. Why should I do anything?"

"Good old Mark!" Donald looked up, and there was a gleam of admiration in his eye. It was evident he was relieved. "You're a good sport, Mark! I had an idea you would be. Naturally you couldn't be anything else. And yet I don't know that I deserve it. That was a damnable thing I did." He hesitated. "I don't know what made me do it." And he smiled with disarming candour. "Certainly I had no intention of appropriating your honours—not permanently, I mean. But see here, I can't go around now and tell people I wasn't the hero after all—that I didn't get any further than inside the door of that accursed barn, after I've accepted their congratulations and stood up there like a little tin god; now, can I?"

"Certainly not."

"Right-o! Good boy! I thought perhaps you'd see it

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that way. Then you're going to continue to let me carry off the honours of the evening?"

Mark nodded.

"It isn't that I don't appreciate what you did for me," Donald continued. "I mean not alone saving Prince—I'm no end grateful for that; but I mean this other thing. I don't mind telling you I felt like a skunk about it last night after you and Marian had gone. I tell you I can't think what made me do that—let them all think it was I." He laughed. "It is rather a joke when you stop to think about it—my bunkoing them all like that! But when you put that rope into my hands, there, just inside the barn door, and told me to go ahead, I had no idea of doing what I did, or anything like it. I hope you'll understand that. In fact, I didn't have any ideas at all; I was too scared to think. It was a thousand times worse in there than I expected!—That smoke! And the heat! How did you do it, Mark? Tell me about it."

Mark shook his head.

"I can't. I don't remember. I only recall feeling I had to get in there, somehow—and the horses kicking and trampling. I knew where Prince's box was, fortunately. He seemed a little calmer than the others. I remember there was a rope some one had left hanging on a wall. I don't recall anything else—except finding you outside the stall. I think Prince recognised you."

Donald's face was serious. "It must have been hell! And then I slip in and take all the credit! I expect you think I'm a good deal of a rotter. It was when I heard them cheering and all that I fell. I like popular adulation—like to show my feathers off, I suppose."

Mark waved the matter aside. "It's all one who did it. You did rush in," he said. "You had every intention of rescuing your horse—the bravery was all there all right;

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and you probably funked the danger less than I did. I only happened to have got ahead of you, that was all."

"Rather small thanks you got!"

"That's of no consequence."

Donald nodded and sighed. "I suppose what you say is true. It makes me feel better, anyway. You always were a noble character, Mark—too noble; that's your trouble! I wish I had half your virtues! I'd stand a better chance of heaven if I did. But after all, would I have as good a time here on earth? One can't tell. Well, I won't detain you longer; you're busy."

He rose and stretched out his hand across the table. "Oh, no, never mind; I see it's bandaged. Too bad! Let me know if it goes on all right. Bother you any?" Mark shook his head. "Right-o! See you next vacation, I hope. Good-bye."

Donald went down the road towards the village with a lightened heart, a comforting sense of duty done. It was a glorious day, bright, clear sunlight after the week of storm. He felt in excellent spirits; his faith in himself was restored. After all, Fate could never be hard on him.

2

Somewhat later in the day Marian met Donald in Whitridge and he asked her if he might call at the cottage that evening. She gave assent with mingled feelings of delight and trepidation, and went home in a delicious flutter of excitement.

Oddly enough she had never had a caller before. Mark, it is true, had "stopped by" at the cottage on summer evenings before now, and they had sat together on the front steps. She wished it were warm enough to do that now. There was something friendly and informal about the steps; but she felt that was out of the question. Com-

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mon politeness demanded that she take him inside in the little cottage parlour, and she knew that there she would feel the weight of conversation. And there were her mother and Ted. How would they act?

Alas! when the time came she felt that they had behaved as badly as possible. Nevertheless, beforehand she looked forward with joyful anticipation to his coming. This visit of Donald's held for her a keen significance.

To Donald there was nothing remarkable in his going now to the cottage, despite the fact that never heretofore had he done so. Perhaps he might have raced through the stable yard in a game of "tag" with Mark and Marian in bygone years, but ever since he first left Whitridge to go away to school he had held himself aloof from the cottage and its inhabitants—save for his friendship with Marian. Not that he had remained away consciously, as had his mother; it was only that he had never before felt any desire to go there. Now he did; a sudden interest in Marian and in her surroundings animated him; and he saw nothing incongruous in presenting himself thus tardily at its door. Or if he had, his fancy setting that way, he would have gone just the same. Donald was not one of those who trouble themselves by thinking very far ahead; the impulse to do a thing was sufficient unto the moment, and his impulse now was to go there to Marian.

His motive in making the visit was simple. He did love Marian in a way—at least, he loved the young eagerness of her caresses, and he felt quite sure that she cared devotedly for him. On the other hand, it scarcely occurred to him that she might suppose his ardent love-making that night on the dunes to be the equivalent of a proposal of marriage—at its least, a sincere profession of love. Yet all the time he was not quite sure in his own mind that it

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was not love. He only knew he wanted to see her; so he went to the cottage.

Afterward he smiled good humouredly at the reception he got. But for him there was in it none of the tragedy which poor little Marian found in it. He had been a trifle vexed; the evening had not been quite what he expected; but there were plenty of other evenings; his calm was unruffled.

Marian received him in the little cottage parlour. Ted was out the first part of the evening, but Elaine was there, sitting like a wooden image in her corner of the room. It was difficult making conversation. Donald was very polite.

"I haven't seen you out riding of late, Mrs. Pritchard," he began ingratiatingly. "Don't you do as much of it as you used to?"

Elaine stared at him stonily. "I've still a number of pupils," she answered shortly.

"It must be a jolly nuisance, sometimes, teaching them to stick on and all that," Donald continued.

"I've my living to make," Elaine responded bleakly.

After that Donald addressed his conversation to Marian. But there was little to talk about with Elaine sitting by, grimly listening, or else pretending, with an assumed patience, to read the book on her knees. There was little or no satisfaction in the more or less formal interchange of commonplaces, even though Donald was affability itself in the way he handled the difficult situation.

And then Ted came in. There was not much cordiality in his greeting, either; but matters might not have been so bad if the conversation had not unfortunately turned on the recent fire at the Hall and its consequences. Three valuable horses had been lost; and this, Ted remarked, was entirely unnecessary. Donald disagreed with him. The firemen, he said, had done their best. He told how fierce

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the fire was, backed by Marian (Ted had not been present at it), and quoted the usual opinion concerning the impossibility of rescuing horses under such conditions. Ted at times was rather childish. Somewhat braggartly he declared if he had been there he could have saved them—and without “all that fuss!”

Marian heard his words with the gravest concern and embarrassment. To her Donald's act had been the most heroic thing she had ever witnessed. She felt she would see him always coming unscathed out through that burning door, smiling, with the docile horse at his heels. Surely there was here something of divine protection—because he was Donald, beloved of the gods! Had her admiration for him admitted of an increase, had she not loved him so devotedly before, that vision must have made it sure. Nor was she alone in this. All Whitridge had heard and applauded the deed. How dreadful of Ted to try to belittle it! She misread Donald's aversion to speak of the rescue at length for modesty. Yet she did know that he was irritated by Ted's remarks, surely at the least in bad taste. She saw that he was annoyed.

He kept his temper, however, and at last took his leave. Marian watched him go with a sinking heart. It was all rather bleak after that wonderful night on the dunes now so long ago. Thinking it over after the lights were out and the household asleep she tried not to feel that it had really been so terrible. Her mother simply didn't understand that she was grown up. Yet she ought to have known; there was Ted. . . . In the darkness Marian blushed.

She awoke in the morning tired and depressed. Instead of seeming less reprehensible on reflection, her mother's and Ted's conduct of the night before appeared worse. It seemed to her now that they had been inexcusably rude.

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She was ashamed, bitterly ashamed; it seemed to her that her family had shown a fearful want of taste and that she herself was associated with them in the general downfall. The humiliation was not made less, since it was as if she must, of necessity, side with them, must go with them into the category of ill-bred people. To criticise them as apart from herself would have seemed disloyal. She felt simply as if all of them, she and her mother and Ted, had proved themselves inferior.

She brooded about the house all morning, answering questions put to her in vague, distrait monosyllables. In the afternoon she went for a long ride along the sea coast. It was a grey day and the beach was bare and deserted. She saw the gaunt headland rising grimly from the sea, and the dunes cold in the pale light. Nevertheless, it was good to be there, to be alone with Nance who never worried her, and the wheeling sea gulls. The ride soothed her.

But on her return her restlessness came back. Elaine was cross and tired and Ted out of humour; Marian began once more to think about Donald and what his opinion of her must be. Even the fact that he had not appeared to mind particularly failed to comfort her. At last on a sudden inspiration she went up to her room and wrote him a little note:

“Dear Donald:

“I’m sorry about last night. I am afraid we were rather rude to you, but you know we don’t mean it—at least, *I* never would. I want to see you to tell you how sorry I am. I think mother and Ted are, too. If you’re not angry, will you walk down here to-morrow evening? I’ll wait for you at the gate so you won’t have to come up to the house if you’d rather not. Please come.

“MARIAN.”

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While her mother and Ted were still at dinner she slipped out and mailed it.

3

The postman was coming up the Hall drive as Connie, returning from a solitary stroll in the direction of Whitridge, and having come back by way of the Thornton Road and the back entrance, rounded the corner of the house.

She waited for him on the steps of the terrace, thinking he might have a letter for her. He gave the afternoon's budget of mail into her hands—a single letter addressed to Donald.

Connie stood in the shade of the terrace trees and looked at the letter in her hands. The hues of autumn had already decked the trees of the avenue in garments of scarlet, crimson and gold, and, as Connie stood there, the dry leaves from the branches above her began to fall softly.

She made a very pretty picture standing there on the smooth terrace with the coloured leaves falling all about her, very pretty in her dark, close-fitting hat and the little band of fur at the throat of her dress, a very pretty picture, indeed, had there chanced to be any one there to see her. But there was no one; Connie had made sure of this by a swift glance at the row of front windows.

Connie stood with downcast eyes staring at the white square in her hands. She turned it over once or twice.

A sudden gust of wind sent the leaves shivering down once more and Connie raised her head to watch them. But she was not thinking of the leaves at all. She scarcely saw them fluttering softly down or heard the sibilant whisper of their fall.

With a little sigh, Connie turned and entered the house. There was no one in the big square hall, but a newly lighted

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fire on the hearth made it cheerful. Connie stood watching the fire broodingly, and toyed with the letter still in her hands. Her fingers were itching to open it. She looked at the fire and back again, and a strange thought shot through her mind. If she were just to throw the letter on the fire, now, like this, without opening it, it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to do. No one would know. Lots of letters did get lost, mislaid, you know, or have something happen to them. It wouldn't be as if she had read the thing and knew what was in it.

With an effort of will she put the letter down on the hall table—true she placed it face down—and ran up the stairs to her room, where she took off her hat and coat. Ransacking through the papers on her desk, she pulled out a note from the rest, and with it still in her hand ran hastily back downstairs.

The other note still lay on the hall table; no one had been in. Connie picked it up and compared it with the one in her hand, Marian's little note of regret of a few days back. As she had surmised, the handwriting on the two was identical.

Having compared them to her satisfaction, Connie slipped her own note inside her blouse. She held the other in her hand tentatively, balanced it, as if weighing its contents. There was a little puzzled wrinkle between her brows.

What *could* Marian be writing Donald about?

Connie was consumed with curiosity. She put the letter down and then took it up again. It seemed to her that she *must* know what Marian was writing to Donald about. And yet, subconsciously, she felt that she did know.

Donald had told her in a more or less humorous way about his call on Marian and some of the things that had

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been said. Connie pretended to be greatly amused, but underneath the amusement ran a current of uneasiness. She read more than Donald would have supposed into that simple visit of his to the cottage.

She was thinking of it now, and wondering if Marian's note might not be in reference to it. Was she asking him to come again? Connie had decided in her own mind that it was that. She was almost sure of it.

If only she could have one little peep at the inside!

There was a sound just outside the hall door and Connie started. She turned instinctively towards the fire. Almost before she knew it Connie had yielded to the temptation and tossed the letter into the flames. She turned to greet Donald as he entered with a mysterious little smile and a somewhat heightened colour. She felt terribly nervous, but Donald did not notice. He looked into Connie's eyes, black as sloe berries, smiling up at him; and waited for her to speak. She chose her words carefully with an apparent carelessness:

"I say, you won't be going out to-night, will you? I've promised your mother we'd play bridge with them. Don't look so cross. It won't be for very long; they get tired, you know. After that I'll sing for you or we'll have a stroll in the garden if it isn't too cold. Does that suit you?"

4

The stars were very bright that night as Marian waited at the gate for the lover who did not come. There was a fresh crispness in the air but it was not at all cold. She rather enjoyed the peace and restfulness of the scene for the first twenty minutes or so, although her heart was eager for his coming.

Ted had left her at the gate on his way to Thornton.

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She watched him swinging down the road with long careless strides. She was glad to see him going out and to know that he would not be back until late. Her mother had not been well for several days and had gone to bed early. Marian was alone with the night and the stars.

She waited at the gate, occasionally taking a short turn up the drive and back, but never far enough to be out of sight or to lose the first glimpse of him as he came.

She was so sure that he would come. The minutes, the quarter hours, the half hours slipped by. Twice she heard footsteps coming along the road and her heart pounded eagerly. But the first time it was only old Danny Devine, the blacksmith, who passed and wished her a gruff good-night in passing; and the other time, some one approaching from the other direction had apparently come only a little way along the road and then turned back, for no one passed the gate. She knew it was not Donald.

She waited, chilled and silent, for over two hours, standing there under the friendless stars, alone and sick at heart. At last, puzzled and humiliated, she returned to the house. She thought he must still be angry and she couldn't understand it. She felt that she would have forgiven him anything!

And of course Donald was not angry, had never been angry. He had thought of Marian on the way home that night after his unfortunate visit, and felt rather sorry for her. Personally, once the first irritation had worn off, he was rather amused by the whole affair. Only, poor little girl! she had seemed so embarrassed. Rotten life she must lead there, tied up to that exacting woman. And the other, the horsy chap, had made rather an ass of himself. Donald dismissed Ted from his mind without further thought.

On the whole, his feeling towards Marian was much

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more tender than before. Had chance, in the person of Connie, not cheated her of her right, things might have gone differently. Had he received her letter, Donald would have gone to her willingly, gladly. Instead, not having seen or heard from her since, he went whistling down the hill in the opposite direction, and spent the early part of the evening in Tim Buckstone's billiard parlour in the village, returning, somewhat late, for the promised brief game of bridge with his parents and Connie.

He never suspected that rather commonplace evening of being a turning point in his life, yet such it was. Love is an impalpable thing, a fragile bloom whose life depends on many a chance wind that blows encouraging or retarding, fostering or destroying at a breath. For a little while Donald felt for Marian, if not love, at least the promise of it. She dwelt in his heart pure and inviolable, a lily trembling in a quiet place, his to pluck should he choose to stretch out his hand; he was only too careless to gather it.

Had they met that night under the cool radiance of the stars the tale would have been different; instead, Donald's absence changed it all, made it simply another of those thousands of affairs that never definitely materialise, never quite come off.

In occasional thoughts on the matter Donald held himself quite guiltless of any blame in that matter of making love to her. It did not occur to him that he had hurt her, made her unhappy. How could he think that, having seen the light of love in her eyes. Rather, he felt, agreeably, perhaps rather nobly, that he had made her happy—at least, for a night. Had he been capable of being touched by the pity of imagination he might have acted differently; but his philosophy of life admitted no such interpretation. He was too much engrossed with living as an art, as a

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delicate and illusory thing, too self-indulgent to resist the temptation to give pleasure where it was so obviously possible for him to do so; or, perhaps, even unable to deny himself the lyric rapture which still lay for him in the clear, unclouded love in a young girl's eyes, spoke from her lips or manifested itself in the wild beating of her heart held close to his.

So he might have explained the situation to himself. He was not to be judged. As it was, he hovered on the edge of the only real and perfect love he would ever know, hovered hopefully; but Connie's hand pulled him back. Donald was not the first man whose life has been changed by circumstances trifling in themselves.

CHAPTER XII

I

MARIAN did not understand why Donald had not come to her that night when she waited by the gate. Her faith had had a shock, but her pride forbade her speaking of it on the few occasions afterward when she saw him before he returned to college. He wrote her from thence much as he had been accustomed to do, letters slight and not overinteresting, but epitomes of himself in their careless, casual good humour.

"I'll see you at Christmas," he wrote her in one of these; and she looked forward with eagerness to the time. But he came before that.

He came before that to attend the deathbed of his mother. Clara Callender died early in December at the Hall. The funeral was from the little village church, St. Peter's by the Sea, where it stands on the cliffs overlooking the wide distances of ocean, a windy waste of troubled waters on this chill winter day.

The mourners filed slowly up to the door, heads bent against the north wind that rattled amongst the wires of the life-saving station, sent whirls of grey sand scurrying, and wuthered in the hollows between the dunes.

Marian went to the funeral. There were not many present in spite of the importance of the Hall in local estimation; one or two motors out from Thornton, Mr. Horner and his daughter, half a dozen friends of Donald's, with a sprinkling of tradespeople.

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She saw Donald only for a moment as he entered the church to sit beside his father in the front pew. He looked not so much grieved as if trying to accommodate himself to the situation. The dignity of the bereaved sat ill upon him. Far more convincing old Colonel Callender's bowed grey head and eyes that, for all his conscientious efforts, showed unmistakable traces of weeping.

Connie had come, too, dressed in faultless black. She sat unobtrusively in the centre of the church and kept her veil down—not, as might have been inferred, to hide evidences of her sorrow, but because the chill north wind had made her nose red, and the powder she had surreptitiously applied in the carriage would no longer stick.

She sat silent and dignified in her place not far from where Marian was, but inexplicably she avoided the latter's eyes. Poor Connie was not to be blamed. It is always difficult to forgive those whom we have injured. In haughty silence she left the church again without having spoken.

Marian saw Donald only once before he left Whitridge again. It was in Whitridge's main street in front of Smith's "General Store," when he gravely thanked her for the note she had written him. He seemed rather at a loss for words, and she thought with a pang, "He isn't meant for sorrow; he shouldn't have it." Colonel Callender was waiting for him in the motor across the street. Everything was hurried and unsatisfactory. No time for anything beyond the most banal formalities. She saw him leave her with a quick quiver of pain.

It was February before he wrote her again. When he did it was to say, "I'm not going to finish college—not going back again. My father's rather miserable and at loose ends so I've planned to join him instead. I don't know how matters will work out. We may travel a bit.

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For the present we're both going to the Leveredges' for a time. . . ."

Two months later, on a day when April trembled like a bride at the lips of spring, she heard the announcement of his and Connie's engagement.

2

The April night was still and sweet as Marian stood by the gate long after the others had gone indoors. The rain in the middle of the day had left the garden full of a poignant odour—the passionate, troubling odour of spring. A breath from the apple tree over near the house floated across to her as she stood there where once, months ago, one haunting autumn night, she had waited in vain for her lover. She stood there now, resting her arms on the top of the gate, leaning a little out over the road.

A gap in the trees across the way let through an irregular patch of pale, greenish sky with one vivid star gleaming in its centre. She could hear the sea just dimly beating on its sandy shore, but seemingly very far away. She turned back for a moment and looked at the garden.

The Judas tree in the corner of the yard was decked with its purple sprays. It stood outlined against the white side of the house; and beside it the japonica bush held up red, waxlike blossoms like cups to catch the dew. The magnolia tree was heavy with buds waiting to burst into bloom.

Marian stood there for a long time in the dusk; a vague, indefinite yearning crept to her out of the garden; and still the poignant scent of lilies, heart-searchingly sweet, drifted across her consciousness. There were so many this year, just there beside her, under the hedge. She had always looked forward so to their coming.

She turned back to the gate once more and stood staring

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at the greenish patch of sky. The stars were bright; they had been bright that other night, too. If only that troubling scent of lilies would not come. . . . Then, through the silence, the whistle of a train shrilled its message, clear, distinct, its strange, half-articulate call of distance, adventure, and far strange lands; poignant, intense, so that the sound was ever to be associated in her mind with heart-break. Never again in after years would she hear it without remembering this night and its deep, intolerable pain.

She went over and stood beside the Judas tree, her hand touching the smooth bark. She ran her hand along one of the branches, feeling the delicate blossoms as they slipped under her fingers, and held it between her eyes and the clear, greenish sky. The stars, seen through the mist of purple sprays, were like fireflies entangled in a net.

The Judas tree! The Judas tree!

Suddenly the significance of its name struck her. She closed her eyes, and, leaning forward, pressed her lips passionately against the bark.

The Judas tree! The Judas tree!

The warm fragrance of the crushed blossoms came to her mixed with the scent of lilies and the sweet, intangible odour of moist earth; the loveliness of it hurt her.

And suddenly, as an odour, elusive and meaningless in itself, will somehow recall memories of scenes with which it has no connection, so now Marian thought of the sea. The memory of that night on the dunes with Donald was heavy on her, grew unbearable.

A swift glance at the lighted windows of the cottage told her all was quiet inside. She would not be missed and she felt that she must go. She turned and sped down the path and through the gate. The long road to the shore lay ahead of her, and down it she went.

She came breathless to the white mass of the dunes out-

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lined against the deepening purple of the sky. She stood where she and Donald had stood that night in June so many months ago; but then the tide had been low and the long shining stretches of beach silver in the moonlight. Now, high up on the sand, the water gurgled and eddied and broke with stealthy suddenness almost at her feet. She was thinly clad and the chill wind blew against her. Far away to her right the gleaming lights of Tonomet shone steadily, arching through the night. She gazed at them, with her heart like a bird's wings beating vainly against them. They looked so cruel and mocking, those clear, unwinking lights, like a fairy bridge across the sky—like the bridge of her dreams!

She stood there shivering in the wind, hearing the sea crying at her feet. Her heart was bitter, as bitter and restless as the sea. At last, turning back, she walked slowly home.

She went up to the house. A great lethargy seemed to weigh down her limbs. The front door was standing partially open. She pushed it wide and entered the little dark hall.

In the room to the right she heard her mother's voice, high-pitched, querulous, talking to Ted, quarrelling about something. For a moment she paused. If only she might go away by herself; but it was too early to go to bed, and a queer kind of pride kept her from seeking the privacy of her own room and the seclusion she craved.

With a little sigh she entered the living room. Her mother glanced up at her but did not stop her rapid-flowing tirade. Ted sat, morosely sullen, sunk down on his spine, his hands in his pockets. He paid no attention when Marian entered.

She sank into a corner of the couch and watched them with dull, unwinking eyes. Although almost as long as

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she could remember these two had been bound up with her life, inseparable figures of her childhood and companions of her youth, yet, as she watched them, she was struck with something unfamiliar. They seemed to her unreal to-night—like puppets on a stage. She felt herself definitely dissociated, so that she could judge them. She saw how her mother had aged, and how Ted had coarsened with the years. She heard their querulous voices disputing some unimportant point, angry, discourteous—yet this, this stage scene spread before her with all its sordid, familiar setting, this had been one of the great romances of the world, a story-book romance, the whole world sacrificed for love—this!

And suddenly she felt a great disgust for all love. There was no such thing as perfect love, perfect faith, perfect understanding; only fools and dreamers hoped for it—fools like herself, and dreamers with the rose-coloured mist of romance in their eyes!

Had she not the proof of that here before her? Her mother had sacrificed everything for love. She was a luxury-loving woman, a high-principled woman, yet she had let it all go by the board; she had left her husband and run away with her lover, given up her whole world of pleasing realities for the dreams of a dreamer, for the sake of an enduring and immortal love, a deathless passion! And here were she and Ted wrangling like any ill-matched couple!

She restrained a wild desire to laugh. But she was right, she had guessed the truth—faith was a dream, and love but a feeble fancy—a sop thrown to the laws of life!

She went on turning this over and over in her mind. For half an hour she forced herself to sit there contemplating her ruined hopes. It was necessary to keep up appearances before her mother and Ted, even though they

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paid no attention to her and could not know, as yet, what she already knew of Donald and his affairs. At last, at the end of the half hour, she rose with an impatient gesture and went to her room.

She leaned far out of the window. Here where she had so often leaned in the old days, the brave days, the good days! And on those two nights when he had kissed her, nights of delicate whiteness.

Now the night was dark and pregnant with storm. She heard the wind moaning in the trees along the road, the wind that had been so gentle before. It blew in at her window, tossing the hair about her cheeks, blustering and threatening, as if it would blow the old dreams out of her head. The stars were gone, blotted out by the thick bellying clouds. The trees in the garden below her tossed and shivered unceasingly.

She heard the first big drops of rain pelting on the porch roof, and bowed her head on her hands. With the beating drops her tears were set free.

Always she was grateful for that rain, for the long rolling crescendo of pattering drops that covered and hid her sobs. Always she looked back at that spring as a time of passionate resistance to a dark, slowly rising tide of despair. Never in after life could she hear the ghostly tapping of rain upon the roof without recalling those dull, patient months of pain, revolt and resignation.

In the morning, in the early dawn, she knelt, white-faced, again at her window. The cool, soft wind from the rain-drenched garden drifted in to her. In the wan dawn-light she made her prayer, thinking of Donald and Connie the while:

“God, make me strong! God, help me to bear it! help me to understand, to be charitable! God, help me to be kind!”

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Then with clear eyes she went down to meet the world. She had failed, she had lost where she had trusted; but no one should guess her loss. It had seemed to her that a miracle had come to pass. In her ecstasy she had fancied the path of love a long, fragrant, flower-laden road, she had never thought of such a tragedy as this in connection with herself. She saw now how unfounded is that sure faith that every girl has that one day the man she is to love will come to her. He had come, and selfishly she had fancied she could keep him. She had forgotten how many women do lose their lovers. Painfully she acknowledged her own unworthiness. It was, indeed, too wonderful that he should love her! She must give that thought up now; she would wish for their happiness—his and Connie's. She would still be faithful to her memory of him, that was all.

CHAPTER XIII

I

AUGUST was come again. How many Augusts had she dreamed away the sunlit days and star-filled nights, hearing the shrill cicadas' murmur and the deep-throated song of birds. August was come, August wrapt in sunlight, deep-bowered in green, heavy lidded, somnolent, ruddy, like a jovial winebibber, passionate, replete. The locusts droned all day and the crickets scarcely waited for the dusk to begin their throbbing music.

Marian viewed the familiar scenes with calm eyes. She was at peace after long months of stress and effort. She told herself that she was content, but it seemed to her that she was much older now. This August found her not much different in body; but in mind many degrees removed from those old years that came and found her care-free.

Towards the end of June had come the news of Donald's and Connie's marriage. It had taken place at the Leveredges' home, Singley Park, and had been, from all accounts, a very impressive affair. The happy couple had gone abroad for a few months; it was said in the village that they would be back in the autumn, that Connie had made an unusually lovely bride, that the wedding cake weighed a perfectly unheard-of amount and the whole affair, in spite of having been kept small out of regard for the family's mourning, had been sumptuous to a degree.

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Marian heard the chatter dully. She knew that at home, at any rate, they guessed something of her pain; and it added to her burden.

On the day that news of the wedding came, her mother had put her arm around her and drawn the girl to her in an impulsive embrace. The gesture, coming from Elaine, was unnatural, forced, affected; Marian crimsoned and was silent.

Ted understood better. He gave no outward sign that he knew she suffered anything, but he took extra pains with Nance's glossy coat, he left Marian to take rides by herself, not offering his company, but appearing with his own horse saddled in case she wanted him. And Marian found that sometimes she did want him. They rode together more than they used to; his silent sympathy could not offend her. Yet it hurt her to be made aware that he and her mother had talked her over between them.

At this time she tried to interest herself in her books. They used to give her pleasure; but now, when she took down the familiar volumes, their words were like dust that crumbled beneath her touch. She gave it up and went for long walks. At first these comforted her, but after a while it became an effort.

She would think, "I'll go for a long walk. But where? Down the Tonomet road." Instantly the whole road was visible before her, every yard of it, white in the sunlight, the rustling green trees as it led out of Whitridge, the brown backs of the headlands as one neared the sea, the blue, blue sky overhead dotted with fleecy white clouds, all the well-remembered beauty to pierce her heart with recollections of days when she was happy. And of a sudden all thought but of Donald would go. Though she reproached herself for it many times, it was impossible not to tell

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herself how she would have given him all her youth and sweetness, yielded him the secret recesses of her soul, giving him love, full measure and overflowing! Then she would tell herself how she was forgetting that Connie could give him the same—perhaps even more abundantly, for was she not infinitely more attractive? So she told herself, rebuking the wild rebellion of her mind; yet always, underneath, she knew that she had loved him better than Connie; instinctively she knew it, deny it as she would; and, like the true woman she was, resented Connie's possession of him.

When these thoughts came there was but one recollection proof against their bitterness—the memory of that night on the dunes. That was hers, even Connie could never take that from her!

Nevertheless, August found her calm, almost content.

One morning she had walked up the long Callender hill past the entrance gates of the Hall. The house had been closed since the preceding autumn, so that there was little danger of meeting any one. Beside the stone gate post Marian paused a moment to gaze into the deep-green archway of the avenue. It startled her somewhat to see a figure round the turn within the drive. Her first thought that it might be Donald, and her equally quick realisation that it was not, almost confused her, so suddenly did relief and disappointment mingle.

She saw, with a little belated flutter of pleasure, that it was Mark Wetherell. He advanced, hat in hand, his arm outstretched in greeting.

“What luck! This is good to meet you like this. I was going to stop in at your place. How have you been? Your family all well? No need to ask after you; you look just the same.”

Marian was really delighted to see him. She asked

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vaguely the meaning of his visit here at the Hall, and he gave her instant information.

"I had a line from the Colonel asking me to look in at the old place and see how things were going—if everything was all right, and all that. It's been shut up quite a while, you know; and he hasn't been able to get down himself. He's gone abroad now to join Donald—perhaps you've heard?"

She shook her head. "Then they are still there?"

Strange how natural her voice sounded!

"Yes, still there, for a while, at least. Though the Colonel thinks he'll bring them home with him when he comes next month."

"Next month!" The words vibrated in her ears.

But Mark was speaking again:

"I've a pile of work to do before I go back. I've got to run in to Thornton now to order some things. Pennyman's going to pick me up down below on his way in. I'm afraid I'll have to hurry. I'm glad to have met you here; I was going to look you up this evening. If I were to come around after dinner, early—that is, before eight—do you think—that is—would you take a walk with me?"

She looked up at his eager eyes, and something in their blue depths hurt her unreasonably. She wanted to decline, something told her it would be the wise thing to do—yet it seemed a little favour to grant an old friend. He must know that she had no engagements. She hesitated a moment, then said:

"Yes, if you come early enough. I mustn't be out late. Mother is not very well just now. I don't want to keep her up."

It seemed safer, somehow, to go early.

"I'll be there before you've finished dinner," he de-

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clared. "You're going the other way, I suppose; well, good-bye; I'm sorry. But we'll see each other to-night then."

She watched him swinging down the hill towards the Thornton road, then turned and slowly pursued her way back to the cottage. However, she was not thinking of Mark as she went, but of what he had said of Donald.

They were coming back—perhaps next month!

Her first feeling had been one of resentment. Why must they come back to exhibit their happiness to her? Why couldn't they leave her alone? Why must she have been created a girl? A man could go away and forget—

"I will go my ways from the city, and then, maybe, My heart shall forget one woman's voice, and her lips,"—

could go afar, "among stranger-folk" and in "wandering ships"; but for one tied as she was, what prospect but to stay, to bear it with the best grace she could?

But slowly these thoughts gave place to others. After all, she wanted to see Donald; she had not realised before how much she wanted it; and she had always admired Connie. The wedding was far more suitable than her own to Donald would have been. Whitridge was their home as well as hers; they had every right to come. She soothed herself with the old arguments, and by the time Mark called at the house, shortly before eight, she was her old tranquil self again.

2

When Mark proposed that they walk down past the sand dunes, she agreed at once. What difference did it make? What right had she to refuse to go to the dunes—to consider them hers, to keep Mark from them if he

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wished to go there? It didn't matter, nothing mattered. Only there seemed a subtle irony in it all.

But when they came to the seashore they passed the dunes and walked instead along the hard, level sands, golden white in the moonlight; for, as if in mockery of that other time, the moon to-night was full, too, or almost full. It shone with a steady radiance, a round, heavy moon, orange-red as it rose triumphantly over the water, full-flushed, replete, drunken with beauty.

But the other, ah! the other! That had been a pale moon, the moon of spring, the cold, white, passionate moon of spring! a moon of dreams and hopes and visions, lighting a silvery pathway across the world to the land of heart's desire, a cold, waxen, faithless, worshipped moon; yet the moon of love; not this, not this. . . .

But she was here and Mark was speaking.

"Marian dear," he said.

It was coming, then! She turned towards him, away from the big, red-yellow moon, her heart filled with a yearning tenderness for him. If only she could stop him, make him see how useless it was before he began. She had been afraid of this when she consented to come here with him. But what could she say? Nothing; better to let him speak. She wished with all her heart that her answer could be different. But here, to-night, with the sound of the sea in her ears. . . .

"It was good of you to come to-night. I could see you didn't very much want to."

So she had let him see that! She couldn't even do that much for him—so she reproached herself. Aloud she said:

"No, no, Mark; that isn't so. I wanted to come. It was only, only that—"

"Wait," he said, and drew her two hands into his

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warm, firm clasp, "wait, dear, and don't try to discourage me before I've begun. I know you think you know what I'm going to say, but not all of it."

Ah! didn't she? The level sands stretched out before and behind them, golden grey under the moon, pinkish where the wavelets broke and receded; beyond them, in irregular humps, the dull green and white of the dunes broke the skyline. They seemed to be alone in the whole universe, just the two of them moving slowly along the deserted sands, Marian bareheaded, in her rough white coat. She paused and lifted her face to his, listening. After all, it was the least she could do for him.

So once again, there on the golden sands, he poured out the tale of his love for her, the eager words stumbling, tumbling from his lips; but in the end all she could do was to shake her head.

"But, Marian, I love you. All my life I've loved you. You know that, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, I know."

"Ah, but if I could only once make you understand how I love you, how I want you!"

"Mark, don't!" she whispered.

He was silent for a moment; then, still holding both her hands he turned her further around towards him, and she caught the faint, tweedy, tobacco smell of him above the salt scent of the sea.

"Darling," he said, "look at me! You've thought I was just stupid about all this—wanting you like this and never giving up asking you. You've thought I didn't understand. But I did. I've never told you, but I knew—ever since that night of the fire up at the Callenders', I've known."

"Known . . . what?"

Her eyes in the dim shadow were inscrutable.

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Mark hesitated. It was all so difficult—not to offend her and yet to say what he had to say. He stood staring down at her. She had drawn away her hands and now she dropped her eyes. He saw that she was playing with one of the buttons on her coat, and that she was waiting for him to speak.

“Forgive me, dear,” he said, “I don’t want to say anything to hurt you—truly, I don’t; but I had to let you see that it wasn’t because I haven’t been able to understand. . . . I’m getting confused; it’s hard to explain. . . . I mean about Donald. . . .”

Still she did not answer. Only went on twisting the big pearl button around and around.

“That *was* the reason—always—wasn’t it, Marian? You did,” he took a long breath, “did care for him, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she said simply, “I did. I cared very much.”

She was turned away from him, looking out at the golden shimmer of the moonlight on the quivering water.

“I did care very much,” she repeated.

“But now,” he said softly.

There was silence.

“It’s all over now, Marian. It must be over now,” he insisted. “You see, it’s all different.”

“No, it doesn’t make any difference.”

Her voice was very low, so low that he had to stoop to catch what she said. But even then he would not believe her.

“But Marian, dear, he’s married now. You must put him out of your heart now; and when he is out can’t you find room there for me? I don’t ask much, dear, only just enough love to make you willing to take me. I’m sure I could make you love me more as time goes on.”

She stopped him at last.

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"Oh, Mark dear, I hate so to hurt you, but I can't help it. I can't tear him out of my heart as you want me to. It's a living thing to me still, my love is. I can't kill it, try as I will."

"I'd help you, dear."

But she shook her head.

"Oh, I do know how wicked I am. I do know that no one can ever love me as you do. I am grateful for it, you do believe that, don't you, Mark? But I couldn't do you the injury of marrying you when I feel as I do. You wouldn't want me to, I know you wouldn't."

She looked at him and her face was so white and woe-begone, that, heartbroken as he was, Mark pitied her more than himself. He kissed the hands he had taken again in his; and then very slowly they turned and retraced their steps to the cottage.

Halfway home she spoke to him again.

"Mark, how did you know?"

No need to explain more fully what she meant.

"I know you so well, dear."

"Yet you never said anything."

"Why should I, dear? I'd have given him to you if I could. I want you to have everything you desire—always—if it were possible. I never asked you after I knew."

They walked on in silence for some distance.

"You're not angry, Mark?" she said, rather timidly, glancing up into his face.

"Angry! Good Lord! no. You don't think I'm such a brute as that, do you?"

"I think you're a dear, Mark," she said quickly; and for the space of a second he felt her lips brush his cheek as she raised herself on tiptoe. It was a small substitute for what he desired; nevertheless, the memory of it com-

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forted him as he walked slowly back with an aching heart to the rectory.

3

Mark had left Whitridge again. August slipped into September, the harvest moon had come and gone, long golden nights of tranquil calm, long golden days filled with sun and sweetness and the lingering sadness of summer ended.

But for Marian the world held other things of moment. She was able to give only a passing thought to Mark's departure. He had, indeed, tried to see her once again before his departure, but it had been all but impossible on account of her mother's illness. A hasty word, a brief good-bye cheerily spoken, her grey eyes raised for a few seconds to his over the cottage gate, and the momentary warm clasp of his hand—it was perhaps the best farewell under the circumstances. Marian, at least, felt it to be so—yet it was unmistakably dreary.

Nor had the news that Donald's and Connie's arrival was imminent affected her much more. She was too busy with home matters.

Elaine was quite definitely ill. The cottage afforded no very adequate arrangements for a sick room, nor was Elaine herself a very patient sufferer. It was the first time Marian ever remembered her mother to be really ill, and the novelty of the situation, added to her own lack of knowledge of nursing, frightened her. She hid her anxiety as well as she could, however, and went about her added duties as nurse with zeal and devotion, at least.

And Elaine was really very ill. A fall from her horse had done the trick. She was riding home, rather late, from a protracted lesson; it was dark and the horse had

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stumbled. The sidesaddle, which she would use when she taught hampered her; and she had strained her back wrenching herself from under the plunging hoofs.

Although hurt she had mounted again and ridden home as though nothing had happened. It was several days before she confessed. A spell of cold, wet weather had increased the stiffness, and there had been fever. At last Marian had been able to induce her to go to bed.

The fact that it had all been due to a fall—sheer carelessness, so she declared to herself, in one who rode as she did, seemed to add to the irritation which she felt at the unusual confinement. She lay in bed and cursed the horse, the darkness and her own folly that had made her fall. She was in pain as well, and disgusted with her own weakness; irritable and cross. Under the stress of illness the indomitable courage which had defied the world, its slights and insults, which had faced unflinchingly the penalties of love unwisely but prodigally bestowed, began to give way. She was no longer the haughty, imperious creature of yesterday; she was only a fretful, sorely tried woman, infinitely weary and despondent.

To Marian fell the task of soothing and cheering, of tending and restraining the patient, as well as keeping the household together and in working order. She tried most earnestly to be loving and gentle, never to let the worn woman, tossing on her unhappy bed, guess that there was anything behind her eager service, yet strange thoughts crowded her mind as she diligently fetched and carried.

Her mother had sacrificed all—so the world would have said—and yet had she? Or was it Ted? She sometimes looked at his handsome, stupid face and wondered. Had her mother, perhaps, in reality sacrificed Ted?

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Thoughts complex and unruly troubled her. She knew that her mother was older than Ted. If her mother had let him alone, would he "have amounted to something," as the saying is? Had she sapped his strength? Perhaps not.

And surely love such as this was a beautiful thing—it ought to be so—love so intense, so all-encompassing, so faithful. . . . Yet was it?

Pity coloured all her ministrations. Yet Elaine was exacting. Marian slaved day and night, even snatching, now and then, a few half hours while Ted sat with the patient, to ride with some of the children whose parents could not be trusted to remain Elaine's clients if she failed them altogether. The business must not be allowed to suffer through her mother's enforced absence.

On one of these days she was out on the Tonomet road, half a dozen children at her heels, when Connie, in a motor, passed her. It was the first intimation she had had that they were home.

Connie drove slowly past the little cavalcade, and leaning out, called to her:

"I say, what a large family!" She had caught the "I say" from Donald, Marian noticed. "Are they all yours? You've not been idle, anyway, have you?"

Marian flushed slightly; and, with a grave little salutation, drew her brood together at the side of the road to let Connie's flashing motor go by.

"That's young Mrs. Callender," one of the children vouchsafed officiously. "She's very pretty, isn't she?"

"Yes, very," Marian answered absently.

So they were come back at last. How would it be when she had to see them often, day after day? She rode home in a thoughtful mood.

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4

Elaine was worse that night. A touch of delirium the doctor said. All the next day Marian sat in mute terror, holding her hand and listening to the half-coherent words that tumbled, one after another, from between the thin, parched lips.

Her wanderings took the form of reproaches for Ted.

"If I hadn't gone away with you, you'd still love me!" she repeated over and over.

Ted, standing at the foot of the bed, his good-natured face puckered with anxiety, the wide, blue eyes mystified, that could not understand, tried to soothe her.

"But I do love you," he protested.

Elaine laughed weakly and tossed restlessly on her pillow.

"Hear him!" she shrilled. "He thinks he loves me. He wanted me to go away with him! And now they won't speak to me on the streets! A lot he cares! I left. I didn't mind that; Sydney was awful! But I tell you people cut me. They won't speak to me. And all on account of him. Look at him! He thinks he's worth it. He says he loves me! Look at him . . ." Her voice clattered to a stop, only to rise again in an instant to a wail of reproach and self-pity, telling its pitiful story. She had always kept such a brave front that the breakdown was doubly tragic.

Marian looked suddenly at Ted. "I think you'd better go—for a little while, anyway. I'll call you later."

He turned miserably and left the room.

"I've always been faithful to her," he told her anxiously before he went.

She saw him later from the window among the dogs in the stable yard, playing with Toodles, Pompey's son.

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He was teaching the young dog tricks, but she could see that his heart was not in it. Already the young puppy could walk on his hind legs, and speak for his food at Ted's sharp, curt command.

It was there that she sought him out later in the day when the time came to call him. Even in the midst of her own distress and the frightened wonder in Ted's eyes, she yet had time to notice how worn and green the collar of his coat was, and how untidy he looked—and marvelled at herself as she did so.

Elaine died just before sunset the next afternoon.

Ted went from her back to the stable yard and mechanically began teaching the little puppy a new trick. He looked rather abashed and somewhat ashamed of himself when Marian came there to call him in for supper.

But Marian, strangely enough, understood. She was desperately sorry for him. With a wisdom beyond her years she recognised his fallibility. As he had told her, he had always been faithful to her mother. Yet impossible to keep love at white heat under the circumstances in which these two had lived. It was really not Ted's fault. When love is satisfied, desire dwindles. He seemed tired and thunderstruck rather than crushed; and almost ashamed of the supper he was eating. His manner reminded her of one of the puppies after a beating. His eyes followed her around the room with a doglike, questioning appeal that tore at her heart.

After supper she sent him out again to the stables on some half-necessary errand, knowing he would be happier there, and went back alone to the room where Elaine lay.

She looked at her mother's face, at the clear-cut features, the nose with its high bridge, the proud, high-

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arching eyebrows and the straight determined mouth, and a great pity swelled the daughter's heart.

Elaine was meant to be a leader—always. A place in the forefront of life had been hers by inherent right—yet all she had led was a little group of unruly children!

And a sudden vision of the past assailed her—Elaine, as usual, leading a horse on which a small boy was perched with a whip in his hand, with which he flicked alternately at the horse and at his leader; Elaine in shoes dull with tramping through the dust, tired, courageous, “game”! She had put a brave face before the world; yet, after all, she had cared!

That night, Ted, in a burst of sudden feeling, put his arm about her shoulders. The gesture was awkward, but sincere.

“Never mind, little girl,” he said, “don’t feel badly. I’ll take care of you!”

She smiled wanly. Poor Ted! She knew that it had always been her mother who took care of him; but she did not undeceive him. And when she rose in the middle of the night and stole to her mother’s door, to find him sitting there, patiently, beside the body, she forgave him everything.

4

The funeral was a thing of nightmare unreality.

After it she walked down on the sands. Ted was busy with the horses. She would be alone here.

The wind blew a shrill gale along the deserted beach. The sea was breaking high up. She saw the scattering fragments of foam, white in the wind, like puffballs dancing up the beach, and far out on the horizon a ship flying before the storm.

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The sea broke at her feet in a thousand flashes of foam and the wind tore at her garments with joyous abandon, but her thoughts were heavy and sodden. They stirred in her heart like alien memories creeping home to rest.

There was Ted; she thought of him first. She saw him vainly trying to kindle a spark from the burnt-out embers of a dead fire. It was true that he had loved her mother, that he would miss her horribly—as one misses a habit—but not with the soul-searing torture of fresh love parted. They had burnt themselves out; had they been foolish, those two? Better a fresh grief? Would love have lasted if they had parted? Were Elaine's dying words true: "If I hadn't run away with you, you'd still love me!"?

Or was it only time that counted? And it didn't make any difference what you did—time would wipe out the deepest grief, still the strongest love!

The dry sands, stirred by the wind, blew against her lips like the dry sands of life. And her thoughts turned from her mother and Ted to her own affairs—and Donald.

And suddenly she realised that the bitterness of her feeling was gone. What did it matter, after all? What did it matter, now that her mother was dead? The new grief had robbed the old of its poignancy. It seemed a little thing now—that Donald should have failed her. She told herself that her love for him had been selfish. There was nothing selfish in her love for her mother. One couldn't even honestly have said that she was a good mother; yet beside the grief Marian experienced now, the other, the old sorrow, faded into insignificance. It seemed small and petty now. She told herself that it was ecstasy compared with this. Doubtless she exaggerated;

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but she knew that now she could think of Connie and Donald living up there at the Hall without bitterness. There would never be any reproach—only a great weariness and sadness.

She went home and started to put away her mother's things. It went well enough until she opened a closet door and saw the row of shoes, heavy and rough for the great amount of walking she did, crumpled and worn. It struck Marian, suddenly, what infinitely pathetic things shoes were without their owners. And about these there was something patient and uncomplaining, something that looked brave and of a stout heart, so pitifully in keeping with her mother's character, that broke the bonds of silence and sent her suddenly to her knees beside the empty bed to cry: "Oh, mother! mother! mother!" to the unanswering walls.

PART TWO

CHAPTER XIV

I

CONNIE CALLENDER sat at her desk, an exquisite affair of teak wood and lacquer, in the morning room at the Hall. It was in the second year of her marriage. Connie had not changed materially except perhaps an added loveliness; a more mature softness and a deeper luster in the dark, expressive eyes, such as comes to women secure in the protecting mantle of married love.

She sat a bit listlessly, her white, well-rounded arm drooping negligently over the back of her chair, the other elbow resting on the open desk before her, the quill pen poised between her fingers, delicately touching the small, red, parted lips in thoughtful preoccupation.

On the couch at her side, Captain Kenneth Disbrow, idly puffing a cigarette, lay at full length and watched her, his bold, handsome eyes scanning her face with frank admiration, one hand lost in the cushions back of his head.

He was one of a house party of eight at present being entertained at the Hall. He was a newcomer in their circle, Connie having met him only once or twice at dinner in town. But he had engaging manners, good connections, and a reputation for being something of a ladies' man, all admirable qualifications for what Connie wanted just then—an extra man to even the number of guests. So he had been included in the party. She had invited him a

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trifle diffidently and he had accepted with enthusiasm. So far he had proved an admirable guest, ready for any entertainment offered and not too devoted to any one member of the party—two qualities which epitomise the perfect guest.

If he could be said to have shown a preference for the society of any particular member of the party, it was for Connie's own. A hostess can always forgive a slight lapse in this direction.

To-day, as had happened several times before, they were alone. Perhaps that was why young Disbrow let his glance rest with such admiring directness on his hostess's face. Connie was faintly conscious of the look even through her preoccupation. The presence of this man often gave her a queer little thrill, quite unique, as if challenging her ever perfect poise, that at the same time vaguely disturbed and yet pleased her. She wondered just what it meant and found herself delighted to wonder.

Up to the present moment Connie had not been taking a great deal of interest in the conversation. They had been discussing the European War then in progress. Their last remarks were enigmatical:

"If we ever should get into it. . . ."

"Oh, but we won't, you know. It's really not our affair. If we'd been going to, we'd have done it long since."

"It seems a pity to stay out, though."

"You'd like us to be involved?"

"Rather! It's such a glorious opportunity; I wish we would."

"Opportunity for what?"

"Oh, to show ourselves off. Let them see what we can do."

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He looked at her coolly, a faint, slightly mocking smile played on his lips. He spoke in an amused voice:

"I'm a soldier. . . ."

"I know. You'd have to go?"

"Of course."

"And—and shouldn't you like to?"

He answered her query with another.

"Would your husband go?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure he would," Connie replied glibly. "Who wouldn't!"

"I wouldn't."

Connie lifted her eyes in wide surprise. "You wouldn't?" she repeated.

"That is, not if your husband went."

Connie looked back at the desk. She knew quite well what Disbrow meant, but she wanted to prolong the interesting moment.

"I didn't know you disliked Donald so much," she remarked demurely. "Still, even so, I should think, given the whole of France, you might be able to endure it."

Kenneth Disbrow broke in on her remarks with a laugh slightly disagreeable to Connie's ears:

"On the contrary, I like Callender."

"Then why . . . ?"

"But not so well as I like you."

Connie smiled and managed a discreet little blush.

"Well?"

"Did you mean you wouldn't go if you were my husband?"

Captain Disbrow was entranced by her innocence—or pretended he was.

"No, that wasn't what I meant. I meant what I said; if your husband went to war, I'd make it a point to stay home."

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"But why?"

"To take care of you, little silly!"

Connie rewarded him with one of her most engaging smiles.

"Do you think we might get into it even now?" she asked, with a playful eagerness that made him laugh.

"I'm afraid there's very little chance. We should have done it before if we'd been going to. When the *Lusitania* was sunk, for instance; that was the time. I shouldn't have been surprised if we'd gone in then." Disbrow was getting quite earnest.

"No-o," Connie was somewhat displeased to observe the conversation taking a diplomatic turn. She hated ordinary conversation. It was amazing how much more bright and interesting she could be when the discussion centred on herself. Egotism lighted up her face then and made her look prettier as well.

"As it is we've rather let the thing slip past us."

"Yes."

Connie turned back to the papers on the desk before her. There was silence in the room for a time. Disbrow lit another cigarette and resettled himself among the cushions. The faintest of little puckers showed between Connie's eyebrows as she pored over the neatly written list before her. Once or twice she said over a name, half to herself.

"It's hard to know just whom to invite," she remarked at last aloud.

Disbrow considered this gravely.

"It ought to be easy enough in a town the size of Thornton. There must be only a limited number of people you can invite."

"Yes, of course, that's so. But there are questions. . . . It's a bore having to include Donald's father. I

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don't see why he had to drop down on us as early as this. Next week would have been so much better. And the Carrolls—I did hope they'd decline!"

"Aren't they desirable?"

"He is. She's a blank. I'm asking him to please Maisie Littell; she's rather gone on him. But of course I had to include his wife."

"Let's put a curse on her then. Maybe she'll be stricken down with ptomaine or something deadly, just before the dinner, and let him come alone."

"Never! You don't know her. She's as jealous as a cat. Besides, I've an extra man already."

"That's bad. Can't you think of another girl?"

Connie reflected.

"There's a girl down in the village," she said slowly, "that Donald used to be rather sweet on."

"Really? How interesting."

"Oh, I don't know about that. It wasn't anything serious."

"A—er—lady?"

"Oh, quite."

"Attractive?"

"Ye-es. I think most people would think so. Rather too serious-minded; but her mother ran away with a lover and they all lived together in the village here, to the great horror of the people around. Not particularly thrilling—the story—but enough to give the girl a somewhat romantic background. The mother died and the man left, but the girl's still there."

Kenneth Disbrow drew a long puff on his cigarette.

"Tell me about her," he said.

"Oh, there's nothing much to tell beyond that," said Connie. "The girl acted rather foolishly people thought, just at first, after her mother's death. She insisted that

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the man—Chamberlayne his name was—should stay on there at the cottage with her if he wished to. People went to her and talked about the conventions—I know Mrs. Wetherell, the minister's wife here, did—but it was rather difficult when they couldn't very well mention what he had been to her mother. There's no doubt the girl knew, but she was as obstinate as a pig about it. I rather admired her myself for the stand she took.

"But in the end some one prevailed on the man to leave. Possibly he wanted to, anyway. I heard he said he couldn't stay after what had happened. They sold the horses—the mother had given riding lessons for a living and the man helped her. Then a convenient aunt was found to come and live in Whitridge, so everything was arranged quite respectably. She—the girl, that is—still lives in the old house and rides a good deal. She kept her own horse. It's a superlatively conventional household from all I hear. So that's the story."

"Indeed!" Captain Disbrow flicked an ash from the end of his cigarette as he watched Connie attentively. "Any money?" he inquired.

"No. No money. At least, I never heard of there being any. In fact, I believe they had rather hard scratching in the mother's lifetime. At least, that's the way I remember it when I used to visit here and see them years ago, when Donald had her up here."

"Well, if she's still here why not have her up again?"

Connie hesitated. Disbrow leaned forward and smiled into her face.

"Not jealous?"

"Certainly not!" Connie repudiated the accusation. "I was only thinking if it would do. You see she's a little—a little—"

"*Gauche?*"

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"No, not that."

"What, then?"

"Well," Connie admitted candidly. "You see, I once did her rather a mean turn."

"In connection with Donald?"

"How did you know?"

"One could guess. And granted, isn't that all the better reason to have her up?"

"I wonder," said Connie deliberately, "if a dinner party would make it up to her?"

Disbrow stared at her. Connie was not looking at him—she was occupied in studying her list, so she did not see the expression on his face, bold, rather impertinent and faintly ironical. As many times before, he was mentally weighing her, wondering; but with a more certain knowledge than he had before possessed. There was something about Connie that made men wonder, vaguely, wishfully. . . . A quality in her which subtly disturbed them, threatened their peace of mind, roused their curiosity and set them dreaming of dim remote potentialities. . . . Something questionable, unexplainable. If . . .

Connie rose abruptly from her desk.

"All right," she said briskly, "I'll ask her, I'll ring her up on the telephone; or perhaps, on second thoughts, it would be better to write a note. She might refuse if I took her by surprise. She's rather shy."

"Oh, don't let her do that. I confess you've made me quite curious about her already."

Connie gave him a brief glance.

"I hope you won't be disappointed. If she comes I'll make it a point to seat her next to you."

Disbrow felt the somewhat frigid contact of her words.

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"And where do I sit with reference to you? That's more important."

"Does it matter?" Connie flashed back.

"You've no heart!"

Connie laughed and coloured bewitchingly.

"Don't you think we've talked enough nonsense for to-day?" she asked reprovingly; and trailed with majestic dignity from the room.

2

Connie's dinner was a great success. Twenty-two people in all, the extra guests culled from the socially eligible of Thornton and its environs. There is no finer snob on earth than your small-city "best people." To say culled is perhaps to use a misleading word. They *were* the elect, the representative, *the* society of the place. And among them Marian Pritchard had a place.

None grudged her that place. It was hers by right of conquest. Like Connie she had changed little; was not very different in looks from the Marian Pritchard of old days; but she had grown from a shy, sensitive schoolgirl into a tall, beautiful woman. Her manner impressed people as being assured. It was not. Underneath, if the truth were told, she was still rather shy; but there was a quiet, dignified poise, a serene, unhurried content about her, that made them, in the midst of the rush and worry of life, feel a sort of calm in her presence, like the touch of a cool hand upon a fevered brow.

There was no lure of the coquette; men would not rush madly to fall in love with her; but they liked to be with her, enjoying, without quite sensing what they enjoyed, the quiet peace of her presence, the calm, intellectual and physical, of her society. Some few people, women mostly, thought her cold; and she was cold, with that strange

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potentiality of unguessed fires hidden deep within her, so deep that she herself had scarcely suspected their existence. Calm and untroubled she waited, like Brunhilde on her rock, the releasing kiss of a Siegfried who had tarried.

To-night she had been glad to go to Connie's. First of all she had all the country girl's innocent joy in a "party," far too infrequent an event in her rather narrow life; and she liked quite simply and unaffectedly to be with her old friends.

Everything was safe and secure now. Where once she had come in ignominy, now she came in at least a semblance of glory. Mark Wetherell had brought her, driving her up the long hill to the Hall in his little Ford runabout.

Mark was studying law in Judge Phillips's office in Thornton now. He worked hard, early and late, seeking always by dint of studious labour to justify that belief in himself which had made his chosen course possible to him. And he was succeeding; men spoke well of him. His feet were already on the highway of achievement.

Mark, perhaps more than the others, had changed. His development, slower than that of his companions, had achieved a result more definite. He was quiet, reserved, and, in spite of the quick, winning smile, rather grave and silent, not with the silence of the taciturn or the timid, but with the quiet of a thoughtful man, a speculative absorption evidencing a critical mind. That innate purity, so prominent a characteristic of his father, had descended to him in an almost quixotic reverence for women. He possessed an unquestioning belief in the goodness of all women which only the most obvious exhibition of frailty could shatter.

Indeed, a certain fine asceticism marked all his associa-

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tions with the opposite sex; there was something almost monastic in his manner of life. It showed, perhaps, a little in the controlled, tight-lipped mouth and forward thrust of the jaw, in the steady blue eyes with their level brows—a strong face, one that gave a sense of stability and integrity. Yet it was not stern, rather, it showed, in spite of its resolute qualities, a certain rare spirituality; for there was present in its clear-cut features that look, remote, faintly mystical, which the faces of dreamers always bear. One guessed at once that he was a *good* man.

Marian was conscious of these qualities in Mark without ever having actually analysed them. So often we fail to appreciate the virtues of those near at hand. Proximity blinds us just as distance enhances the subject. For years Marian had taken Mark and Mark's devotion as a matter of course. She loved him in the same old, companionable way, was glad of him and fond of him, just as she had always been. She would not have recognised her life without Mark's cheery and comforting influence on it.

She sat to-night between him and Captain Disbrow whom she had met for the first time. And she was quite content. Mark was obviously proud of her. He couldn't take his eyes from her. To him she was the most beautiful thing alive; and to other eyes, even the least appreciative, she was lovely to look upon, with her pale gold hair piled high on her head, with her clear grey eyes and firm chin and the vivid glowing colour in her cheeks. Connie thought spitefully, "It's paint." Then she almost laughed at herself, for of course she knew it wasn't. The girl always had it. To-night the excitement had increased it a bit, that was all. No need to be such a cat.

Connie's own colour was radiant. She could bear

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comparison with any one at the table. She knew it well, and mentally reminded herself of the fact to revive her good nature. But a chance remark of Kenneth Disbrow's overhead in the hall before they sat down to dinner, had most unreasonably annoyed her. It could scarcely be called a remark, it was a mere ejaculation. "By George!" Disbrow had said, as he stood below and watched Marian descending the staircase, and again, "By George!" with his eyes fixed upon her. Immediately afterward they had been introduced.

Throughout dinner Captain Disbrow paid Marian marked attention. She herself was not unduly conscious of it, indeed, scarcely noticed it. But Connie did and several of the others. Disbrow quite forgot his neighbour on the other side.

After dinner he drew Connie aside. Maisie Littell was within hearing.

"Why didn't you tell me she was a blonde?"

Connie turned in mute appeal to Maisie, and Maisie laughed.

"Oh, you men! All one has to say to you is 'blonde,' or 'widow,' and you go crazy! I've never known it to fail."

Disbrow laughed, but Connie frowned.

"Didn't I tell you?" she asked carelessly. "I thought I had told you everything there was to tell about her this afternoon. I know you asked enough questions. I had an idea we'd quite exhausted the subject. However, if there are any further points that I can put you wise on, do let me know. This sudden interest of yours is most intriguing!" And she moved away with haughty indifference.

Maisie shrugged and laughed.

"You're not a very tactful man," she suggested play-

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fully to Disbrow. But Disbrow had ideas of his own on that subject which he didn't feel it necessary to impart to the voluble Maisie.

"But that girl's a beauty!" he said, with his eyes on Marian.

"She is," agreed Maisie honestly, "she's a peach!"

Disbrow, with a muttered apology, made his way over to Marian's side. Throughout the remainder of the evening he never left it. He saw her as far as the drive and helped her into Mark's car when the time came for them to leave. They were the last to go because Mark had had some trouble starting the motor.

It hadn't been working well of late, he explained; and there was a good deal of laughter and merriment over the little machine. In the end Donald volunteered to go with them as far as Marian's cottage in case of trouble. He'd enjoy the walk back, he said; and beyond there Mark could shift for himself.

3

Disbrow went back into the house to tell Connie, who was waiting in the drawing-room. The other guests had apparently retired.

He explained the situation briefly. "Donald said to tell you not to wait up for him," he added. "He won't be gone very long."

"Oh, I'll wait," said Connie. She was playing with the fringe of the Persian rug thrown over the large piano. Against the shiny black of the ebony piano case the flowing draperies of her chiffon-and-lace dinner gown fluttered transparent. The dress was yellow, a colour peculiarly becoming to her, setting off her rich brunette beauty most effectively. She was quite aware that she was looking well to-night, but she wanted to hear Dis-

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brow say so. She was greedy for his compliments. Since he did not give them at once she grumbled a little.

"I don't see why Donald had to go with them way down there. It's a long walk back. And at such an hour! Mark ought to be able to run a simple car like that without him. He knows a lot more about it than Donald, anyway. It will be awfully late by the time he gets back."

"Why don't you go to bed!" Disbrow suggested coolly. He had lit a cigarette and was preparing to seat himself in his favourite chair. He did not appear particularly interested in his hostess at this moment.

"Because I don't want to," Connie answered his question somewhat crossly.

Disbrow, instead of sitting down, walked over to the fireplace and flicked the match into the grate. He was watching Connie with a faintly amused expression.

"Ah! a little jealous still?"

Connie turned on him angrily. "You're rude!" she flared.

"Sorry!"

Disbrow continued to puff his cigarette calmly. Connie studied him with a certain little pucker of dissatisfaction between her brows—almost of anxiety. His attitude of aloof superiority worried her faintly. She didn't understand this new mood of his. Before, he had been her slave; but to-night their positions appeared somehow to have been changed. Could it have been the mere meeting with Marian that had brought this about? Connie bit her lips with annoyance, and continued to watch Disbrow who appeared unconscious of her scrutiny.

Connie drew a long breath and gathered her resources together. To be ousted by Marian was unendurable—it was absurd! Wisdom cautioned her to go to her room at once; to leave this impertinent and rebellious young

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man to recover from such folly by himself—a night's reflection would doubtless do the trick. And she might then, without loss of dignity, ignore his present lapse. Yet something tempted her to stay. Something not unconnected with Kenneth Disbrow's bold blue eyes and the square set of his shoulders; to tarry yet a little with him, to match her powers of coquetry against his arrogance. She told herself that she had always loved danger, and, secretly, she wanted to discover if there was danger here.

"Why should you fancy I was afraid of anything between Donald and little Marian Pritchard?" she asked lightly. "You yourself paid her more attention than any one to-night. I thought you quite monopolised her."

Captain Disbrow looked innocently surprised. "I!" he murmured. "I! You know that isn't so. How could I look at any one else when you were there?"

For once his flattery was distasteful to Connie; sounded unutterably crude; wanting in taste. She gave an impatient shake of her head.

"Don't be a fool!" she said shortly.

Kenneth Disbrow did not smile. Instead, he walked over to where she was standing and put his two hands on her shoulders.

"Tell me honestly, whose attentions to Miss Pritchard were you angriest at, Donald's or mine?"

The effrontery of the query ought to have silenced Connie. She looked up at him and for an instant a strange, potent fear thrilled her. A thousand questions and vague imaginings darted through her brain, just as, a short time previously, a thousand doubts had disturbed him. But he had determined to risk it.

Connie hesitated. They were standing close together. Connie told herself that she must make some answer,

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say something to make him take that keen, riveting gaze from her face, and the heavy hands from her shoulders. And, oddly, she felt almost powerless to do so.

But at that moment an interruption occurred. It came in the person of Colonel Callender who walked unexpectedly into the room.

Connie and Disbrow stepped apart. The former glanced with thinly veiled scorn at her father-in-law. He had apparently not seen.

Colonel Callender shuffled over to the table in search of a book he wanted. He was not, in reality, a very old man, but he had aged terribly since his wife's death. His old blustering boyishness hung upon him still, but sadly out of character, fitting him ill, like a coat grown too large for its wearer.

He came into the room with a muttered joke on the inability of an old man to remember anything for two minutes at a time; and Connie and Disbrow drew away from each other. His errand there was soon finished. He left almost immediately, but for the two remaining the spell was broken.

With a brief good night and leaving Disbrow's question still unanswered, Connie slipped upstairs and without looking back entered her bedroom.

Odious old man! she thought, as she stood before her mirror letting her hair fall in heavy masses about her lovely shoulders. Odious old man! She did not attempt to disguise her feelings towards her father-in-law. She felt him something of a burden on her hands, even though he visited them seldom. Donald was so ridiculously solicitous about him, always felt so frightfully responsible. It was absurd!

Connie stared at herself in the mirror and half unconsciously tried the effect of a frown. She was sure she

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hated the old man for his interference with her plans to-night, and yet subconsciously she knew that the interruption had come as a bit of a relief. There had been something a trifle too assured in Disbrow's manner, too much understanding in his eyes. For once in her life Connie had been actually at a loss for a response.

No doubt she would have thought of something clever and reproving to say—if she had been given a chance and the old man hadn't come in. As it was, that did away with the necessity. And she had all the long night to arrange a suitable attitude with which to greet Disbrow the following day.

When Donald came to his room a little later she greeted him coldly, almost resentfully, as if her annoyance to-night had been due to his behaviour, as if he were responsible for her inward dissatisfaction.

4

Connie and Donald argued the matter out—or rather, Connie argued and Donald, rather good-naturedly, listened. She said that Marian had behaved in a disgraceful manner. Neither Donald's ridicule nor her own fundamental good sense would move her from this attitude. She had, Connie said, deliberately tried to make up to Kenneth Disbrow, doubtless because she knew he had money. It was no use Donald's saying the girl was absolutely unworldly and all that rot! She had been known to set her cap for even richer men than Kenneth and failed.

Donald ignored the allusion. He left her at last, more or less disgusted and impatient, and Connie went over it all again by herself.

She had asked Marian to her dinner party out of sheer good nature—so she told herself. She had wanted the

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girl to enjoy herself, obviously. She convinced herself that she had worried before the event lest Marian shouldn't have a good time. But she hadn't wanted her to be the central figure of the evening. Connie liked everything in moderation. Having worried so much about Marian—such was her version—it was naturally annoying to find her upon first appearance so universally admired. Of course men were like sheep in these matters, Connie had often noticed that; nevertheless, it was galling.

There was Mark Wetherell. She didn't grudge Marian him. He was attractive enough, of course, but the obviousness of his devotion to Marian had made it apparent for a long time.

But Donald again! And now Kenneth! Connie had begun to look on Disbrow as her own property. At the same time she was wise enough to know that her hold on him was considerably slighter than that which marriage gave her—hence her disquietude. Connie was a natural flirt. It came to her as easily as breathing. Impossible for her to meet a man without desiring, however unconsciously, to subdue him, to reduce him to a state of vassalage and persistently offered homage. And hitherto it had invariably been her experience that she could do this when she tried.

But in the case of Kenneth Disbrow her desire had been more acute; he interested her to a greater degree than was usual. Connie felt instinctively that there was something about him, something compelling, conquering, a touch of the cave-man element in his nature to which hers responded inevitably. She had rather gloried in the still indefinite prospect of a future problematical surrender. Now to have Marian step in and so frankly make a conquest annoyed her immeasurably.

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But it doubled her regard for Disbrow and her determination to bring him to her feet. Connie was one of those persons in whom minor jealousies and the idea of competition are strongly influential factors.

She decided to punish Disbrow for his defection by exhibiting towards him a coldness quite at variance with her usual demeanour. She gave him no opportunity even to speak with her alone. Laughing good-naturedly, but without relaxing her determination, she avoided his obvious efforts to capture her personal society. It was easy enough in that houseful of guests always to have one or another at her side, just as it had been simple enough before for her to arrange an occasional tête-à-tête with him when she so desired. Connie was clever at such a game; she had had much practice with the moods of men. Kenneth Disbrow smiled and waited.

5

On the afternoon following the dinner party at the Hall, Donald went down to the village. Stopping at the cottage gate on his way past, he found Marian in the front garden, clad in a large all-over apron of bright blue gingham. She was weeding the flower beds that ran along the fence, her back bent seriously over her work.

He called to her and she looked up, waved a friendly hand and then crossed to the gate to speak to him, pulling off the heavy garden gloves from her hands as she came.

She had on a large hat that cast a deep shadow over her grey eyes and half covered the knot of fair hair coiled loosely in her neck.

Donald leaned on the fence and Marian stood on the other side, one hand holding the gloves and the trowel

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with which she had been digging, the other smoothing the dirt from the blue apron. There was a faint colour in her cheeks that appeared to deepen the violet of her eyes, set in their rings of fainter violet. The shadow of the big hat reached as far as her firmly cut chin with its delicate cleft.

Donald absorbed her still unconscious beauty with his eyes. He felt in a lazy mood. It would be pleasant to stop here, leaning against the old picket fence, for an indefinite period, if only she would stand there, too, and talk to him.

"What are you growing?" he asked; not because he cared about knowing, but because he wanted to see the curved red lips open and to catch a glimpse of the white, square, little teeth within.

"Oh, nothing," she replied. "Only the same old lilies and iris and delphinium that have grown here for generations. The bloom's mostly over for this year, though. I've only the annuals, the calendulas and zinnias to count on now. But the weeds start up so quickly if you let things slide at all."

She raised the hand that held the old brown glove, and with the bare, bent wrist pushed aside a lock of the fair hair that was straggling into her eyes. The sun glinted for an instant on the smooth white cheek as she tilted her head.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, a trifle doubtfully. "We can sit on the porch. I don't have to do this, you know." But he shook his head.

"Just on my way down to the village. I'd like to stop but I've an errand I must do. Seen anything of Danny Devine lately? I suppose he's still at work, isn't he? I've a job I want him to do for me."

"He went past here last evening at about five. He's

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not working much now. He's rather old and he's been ailing the last few months. But I dare say he might be able to do something. Especially for you."

How grave and serious she was! Donald looked at her and saw again the child he had known so long—known and yet not known, for even now she was a riddle to him. And yet he would not change her. She was as she had always been, a simple-hearted, innocent child. He saw her, pure and lovely, untouched by the world, keeping still the wistful dreams of girlhood, beautiful in soul as well as body.

A little sad though. He looked at her and thought, "Doesn't any one ever make her laugh?" He cast about in his mind for the latest funny story. What was that one Disbrow had got off last evening?

But at that moment Mark Wetherell came up the road and joined them.

"Hello, Donald," he said casually. There was a faint coldness in the greeting.

The conversation became general; and after a few minutes Donald left them to pursue his errand in Whitridge.

"Did you have a pleasant call?" Connie asked later in the day when he mentioned having stopped at the cottage.

"Oh, I was only there a few minutes," Donald answered carelessly. "Mark Wetherell came up so I left."

Connie smiled disagreeably.

"Well, you really couldn't expect to cut *him* out, you know."

Donald turned sharply. "Why? Is Wetherell specially favoured?"

"Are you blind?"

"Well, you can't blame him."

Connie was tapping her foot gently on the floor. She

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was not really angry and she would probably have ignored Donald's last remark had he not added:

"I thought Disbrow took the count, too, the other night. I never saw a chap harder hit on short notice. I shouldn't have been surprised to find him at the cottage to-day rather than Mark."

Connie crumpled the fresh handkerchief in her hand into a hard round ball. She whirled upon Donald indignantly, but controlled her voice admirably.

"If there had been any chance of Kenneth's going there," she said lightly, "you may depend upon it, Mark Wetherell would have been told to keep away."

Donald frowned.

"That's rather ill-natured under the circumstances. Just what do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Mark hasn't a great deal of money. It should be simple enough for Kenneth to displace him if he wished."

"Money!" Donald repeated. "What has money to do with it?"

"Oh, it usually does count with girls like that, you know."

He laughed shortly.

"That's absurd! Marian's the last girl in the world to be influenced by that. She'd care as little whether a man had a million as a penny. She's as far above such considerations as any one I know."

Now Connie, as a rule, kept her head better than most women, but for some obscure reason this championship of Marian infuriated her. She shrugged her shoulders again and remarked:

"In the long run money talks. You always pretend to know so much about the world, yet you're as simple as a child. Take this little village girl, for instance. I sup-

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pose nothing would induce you to believe that Mark Wetherell is keeping her."

Donald stared at her. "Good Lord!" he gasped. And for a few minutes he felt for her a positive revulsion, the natural revulsion which good breeding feels when brought face to face with vulgarity. He had never noticed this trait in Connie before. His own perfect good taste had blinded him. He was, in fact, too well bred to observe that Connie was not. Only a flagrant breach such as this could bring home to him the absence in Connie of those little niceties of instinct which make true breeding more an attitude of mind than a mere question of manners.

"For I don't suppose he means to marry her," Connie added, while he still stood with mouth agape.

Donald pulled himself together suddenly.

"Connie," he said, "you can't mean what you're saying. Or if you do you ought to be ashamed to repeat anything so improper. I hope you haven't mentioned this to any one else—but I know you haven't. You've too much good sense to believe it, anyway."

But Connie would not retract. "You must admit I generally know what's going on," she said. "And as for the impropriety, of course you men always pretend to think every one so pure! Your wives mustn't ever dream of saying such a thing aloud!"

"You mistake me," Donald replied deliberately. "I was thinking of Marian when I spoke; not of you."

"Oh!" said Connie briefly, somewhat taken aback.

Donald laughed.

"And as for marrying her, well, I very nearly married her myself, if you want to know."

Connie bit her lip. "Why didn't you?"

Donald decided all at once that there must not be a quarrel. He leaned over and kissed her neck lightly.

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"You know why."

But Connie pulled away.

"I suppose *you* didn't find it necessary either."

He frowned, and turned to leave the room.

"I'll come back when you're in a more normal mood. I won't listen to you saying such things. You can't be serious and it's in rotten taste, anyway. You'll have to learn to control yourself."

He went out, slamming the door behind him.

6

Donald Callender was not one to let any annoyance, either great or small, trouble him for very long. Nevertheless, he thought more than once during the succeeding evening of what Connie had told him. Not that he gave any credence to the statement. He put it down for what it was—a moment's spitefulness on Connie's part. Yet the more he thought of what Connie had said the angrier he became. He seemed to see her for the first time in a new light.

Not that he condemned her unduly. He only realised what he had not before, that in nature there are "seconds," just as there are in manufacture. Inevitably he contrasted Connie's willfull flashes of petulance with Marian's quiet charm. He saw her again before him, and in her clear grey eyes with their level brows, an "unclouded noon of peace."

The remembrance made him less cordial to Connie than he might have been when she came to him in his study early the next day. He was busy over some household papers and Connie's interruption was untimely.

She hovered uncertainly in the doorway with a somewhat ill-concealed effort to appear at ease and intimately friendly.

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"Oh, Donny, I've found that receipt we were looking for from Weston about the Thornton house," she said when she saw what he was about.

He looked up and nodded. "Oh, thanks."

"I—I'll bring it to you."

"Right-o."

"Later," added Connie. "I wanted to speak to you about something else now."

"Oh—er—yes?"

"Do you think," said Connie, with inspiration, "that Macklin is a really good gardener? I'm wondering. I've never seen the place look worse. I thought perhaps you might have noticed. Do you think you could speak to him?"

"No," said Donald, "I don't. I don't care a hang about it anyway, and I haven't noticed anything wrong with the flowers. But you may speak to him if you like. I leave all that sort of thing to you. He's been here a good while, but by all means get another if he doesn't please you. It's your garden."

"I know." Connie was thoughtful. Evidently there was little approach to Donald's interest along this line. She tried another tack.

"I was wondering if we might plan for another house party along about the twentieth, say. What do you think? Would it be fun? Or had you made some other plans?"

"No, I've no plans."

"Well, then, whom would you like to ask?"

"Oh, any one you like. I don't know. I'll leave that to you."

Connie sat on the arm of a chair and swung her foot, disconsolately. Donald had turned back to his accounts. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly. How provoking he was when she had come there this morning on

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purpose to be agreeable! Connie followed the handsome line of his profile as he bent over the desk, and, as often before, she was thrilled with a sudden affection for him, not so much admiration as the pride of possession. She waited a few minutes and then spoke again:

"You're not taking much interest in me, Donny."

He pushed back his chair impatiently.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked quickly.

"No, I'd about finished, anyway." He rose and closed the top of the desk with a snap. Connie stood up, too, her hands fluttering like delicate moths over the bosom of her dress.

"Donny," she said quickly, "I'm sorry I was so disagreeable last night."

"All right," he said.

She ran to him impulsively.

"I'm horrid, aren't I?"

He smiled.

She clenched her little fists fiercely.

"Why don't you beat me? I should in your place."

He laughed as he put her lightly from him.

"It wouldn't do any good."

She drew back, abashed by his coldness. There had been no desire in the embrace he gave her. And suddenly she thought, "He is ashamed of me!"

"I'm going out to look over the new greenhouses down the hill," Donald explained cheerfully.

Her eyes followed him to the door; eyes remote, rather hard, strangely speculative.

He had rebuffed her little attempt at penitence. She hardened suddenly.

When she went downstairs there was a message from Disbrow lying on the hall table. It contained his excuses and apologies for hurrying away from the house party.

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unexpectedly. The note said he was catching the early train from Thornton, and regretted that there had been no chance even to say good-bye. His summons was urgent and he had no choice but to comply.

Connie laughed rather grimly as she read it. She stood silent in the hall for a long time after she had finished it, crumpling the letter slowly and thoughtfully between her fingers.

CHAPTER XV

I

MARIAN, as she walked up the gravel path in front of the cottage, heaved a half-audible sigh of relief.

But a few minutes before she had alighted at Pennyman's corner from the Thornton bus, whither she had gone to see Aunt Julia and Miss Purvis off on the train for a visit to the latter's home. It was the first time Aunt Julia had left her since she came to live at the cottage. Miss Purvis—Miss Kate, as Marian called her—had been their guest for the past month, and Aunt Julia's return visit had been a thing long talked of and planned for.

In the year they had lived together, Marian had grown to be very fond of Aunt Julia, her father's elder half-sister. Yet she looked forward to the coming period of life without her with a certain childish elation in her absolute freedom. There had been a somewhat trying moment of indecision just before the travellers left, when Aunt Julia had threatened to recant her promise to Miss Kate and abandon the whole idea of the visit.

Aunt Julia was timorous. It occurred to her of a sudden that Marian ought not to stay alone at the cottage. Marian expressed her entire absence of fear, but Aunt Julia insisted that she ought to be afraid. It didn't matter whether she was or not. For there were no nearer neighbours than the Hall on the one side, and Danny

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Devine's cottage on the other, and, as every one knew, Danny was not only deaf but crippled with rheumatism besides. What would Marian do if burglars came, or fire broke out, or tramps appeared from nowhere?

Marian laughed. "I'll be careful, very careful about fire, auntie; and we haven't enough here to tempt burglars. As for tramps, there hasn't been one seen in Whitridge in years. Besides, if there were any they'd all go to the Hall. No indeed, I shall be perfectly safe and rather enjoy being alone. And you mustn't disappoint Miss Kate; you must go with her as you promised."

Miss Purvis added her entreaties and reassurances to Marian's and in the end they had their way. Miss Julia departed, a large, anxious, quivering mass of excitement and apprehension.

She wiped a hasty tear from her eyes as she leaned out of the train window to wave a final kiss to her niece.

"Be a good girl, Marian, and take care of yourself. Be sure to lock the house up well at night and don't go out without taking the key with you. Remember to order the groceries early and be sure to have Mrs. Challock come every Wednesday to do the cleaning. And don't tire yourself all out getting meals. Run down to Mrs. Jerrold's occasionally. And if you get too lonesome, don't be afraid to send for me. I can get home in half a day's time, you know. Dear me, the train's starting. Well, I suppose we must say good-bye. I almost wish I weren't going, I do, indeed. Do be sure—but there isn't time—*Good-bye, dear! Good-bye! Good—*"

Marian followed the slowly moving train down to the end of the platform, waving and smiling. Then she returned to Whitridge and the empty cottage, feeling rather strange and important and thoughtful.

After all, it had been a success having Aunt Julia here.

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At first she had doubted, had resisted with all her strength the idea of a newcomer at the cottage—a woman she had not seen since she was a very small child, scarcely more than a baby. But the pressure brought to bear had been too great for her. It was just after Ted had left, going miserably away to pursue his fortunes elsewhere. Mrs. Wetherell, the only person to whom Marian had found herself able to turn at the time of her mother's death, had favoured the idea of Aunt Julia. She had taken upon herself to write and find out Miss Pritchard's views. The result was that Aunt Julia was found to be a particularly lonely person. She had no real home and would come to Marian gladly. Mrs. Wetherell talked it over with the girl.

"Have her for a little while, anyway," she suggested. "We'll call it just a visit at first, until you find out how you both get along with each other. It will do no harm to try; and you needn't commit yourself beyond that." And Marian had bowed her head.

So Aunt Julia was sent for. She arrived; a pleasant, affable, not too garrulous old lady with an expansive, beaming smile; and herself almost as large as the little cottage rooms. Marian feared at first that she wouldn't be able to get around them, but she proved not only able to move rapidly and easily, but to be extremely energetic. She was an excellent manager, and in almost no time effected changes in the housekeeping which were little short of miraculous. Aunt Julia saw to it that Marian had regular and hearty meals; Aunt Julia saw that the vegetables and groceries arrived fresh and promptly; Aunt Julia undertook that there should be no waste or want in the cottage.

The girl quite early turned over to her the whole direction of the housekeeping. She interfered not at all

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with Marian's personal liberty. They had spoken once only of Marian's mother. Miss Pritchard was a wise woman, and after that once the subject was not brought up again.

Yes, taken all in all, Aunt Julia was a success. Marian was fond of her; but this visit to Miss Purvis was going to do them both good, give them time to recapitulate, to regard each other in the focus of distance and to acquire new points of view.

Aunt Julia was chatty and sociable. Marian felt that she herself must often have provided dull company for the kindly old lady. She had enjoyed having Miss Kate there. They had had a splendid time together, indulging in long conversations, seemingly about nothing at all, but which gave them great pleasure. And now in Miss Purvis's own home with new topics, new fields of interest, what long days of enjoyment awaited them. She saw Aunt Julia, fat and smiling and comfortable, and Miss Purvis, with her prim, pursed-up mouth and withered little frame, going about together here and there, chatting, calling, gossiping, playing cards, altogether having the time of their lives. She was very glad for Aunt Julia and wished much pleasure for her.

Meanwhile she meant to enjoy the occasion, too. She was making plans towards this end as she walked up the gravel path before the cottage.

First of all she meant to take a lot of long rides. Nance, not so young as she had been, was sadly in need of exercise. They must renew their old good times together.

But just now, to-day, she wanted only the large, open feeling of the empty house, the surety of being able to go and come as she pleased. She planned a long afternoon of puttering and fussing about, looking over old keepsakes, sorting old letters, feeling again the charm of

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complete and unchallenged ownership. How foolish of Aunt Julia to think that she would be lonely or at a loss for amusement!

And there were the old stables; she must look at them. She had not been over them in a long time. Her thoughts flew for a moment to Ted and how well he used to keep the place up and the buildings in repair; and for a fleeting instant she felt a faint homesickness for him.

And yet she did not really wish him here. She wanted just what was before her, perfect freedom, perfect peace and content.

2

An hour or so later Marian came out of the house by the back door and proceeded across the narrow strip of grass to the entrance of the stable yard.

She walked along the edge of the paddock and past the low-roofed small extension where Nance still lived in lonely splendour. This was the only one of the buildings still in use. Connected by a series of low sheds with the main stables, it had seemed more feasible to utilise it as Nance's future domicile, for it was closest to the house and consequently more convenient for Marian who now took entire care of the horse herself.

But Marian was not bent on a visit to Nance to-day. Instead, she walked on to the main building and paused for a moment before the partly open door.

The thought of Ted recurred, Ted as she had last seen him going down the road towards Whitridge, a shabby suit-case in his hand, looking seedy and old. They had found the suit-case in the attic after a prolonged search, for no one in that family had ever travelled much. Well, that was long ago.

She pressed against the stable door. It stuck and she

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had to lean her whole weight against it to move it. Then gathering her skirts about her she entered.

The place was rather dark and musty, but neat and orderly, just as Ted had left it so many months ago. She wandered about for a time, gazing in somewhat melancholy silence at the empty stalls and the worn and rotting saddles hung up in a row above the pile of leathern straps, buckleless, broken or otherwise useless. She was mistress of all this now. Yet something depressing in the sight made her turn away.

She walked over to where the ladder leading to the loft had been left standing idly against the side of the open trapdoor. After a second's hesitation she mounted it. She had not been up here since she was a little girl.

It was much lighter and airier up above. The door in the front, with its overhanging crane and tackle for lifting in the hay, had, through some oversight, been left open. Marian thought with a sudden recollection of responsibility, "I must see that it is closed before the snow comes again."

The floor, strewn with hay that crumpled and was soft under her feet, sloped invitingly towards the open space. She went over and stood in the opening, letting the soft breeze from outside play upon her face. It was a warm, sunny day, clear and sparkling. It seemed to her that she could see very far away beyond the house and the stable yard and the long straight line of trees bordering the road that ran towards Thornton. Surely she was closer, much closer, to the white feathery clouds floating overhead.

She glanced back towards the interior of the loft again. She saw the grain bins, cobwebby and mouldy; and the sweet, acrid scent of apples greeted her nostrils delicately.

Stooping down she made a place for herself in the dry hay just inside the open door, and sitting down, swung

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her feet out over the yard below. Pleasant to be lifted up here, high above the world, to pretend to be imprisoned in an enchanted tower, with Camelot or Ascalon down there below. These might be dragons approaching, looking like tiny creatures from her great height. But they were only the two puppies, Toodles and Tags.

Marian called to them and waved her hand. They scampered about, wagging their tails and giving short, ecstatic barks, but they could not get up to her there. She laughed happily, and leaned her head back against the side of the doorway.

It was there that Donald found her. He strolled out from around the side of the cottage looking for her. He did not see her for some time. She kept still and watched him glancing quickly about in search of her. Then the barking of the dogs called his attention to her, and he took off his cap and waved it.

"Come up," she called down to him.

"I say, don't lean so far out. You might lose your balance. How did you get there? You didn't fly up, I suppose."

"There's a ladder inside. You can climb it if I did."

He disappeared below and in another moment was by her side.

"I'll fix you a cushion here beside me."

She knelt on the floor and pulled the hay together into a rude seat, and he crouched there beside her, a little back from the opening.

"Be careful! You'll fall out."

"Oh, no, I won't."

But he caught hold of her arm and did not let go until she was seated again.

"What were you doing up here? Just dreaming?"

She nodded. "I was looking over the old place to see

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how it was faring now that we don't use it any more; and it was so pleasant here that I stopped. It's rather nice, don't you think?"

The sun was getting low now, sinking rapidly behind the barn. Its level rays pressed steadily against the house standing out flat against its background of green; picked out a fragment of something shiny, a bit of broken glass, perhaps, in the yard below, and set it sparkling like a diamond. There was the faint pervasive smell of apples within and the warm smell of flowers from without. A flat, tinkling sound, the sound of Danny Devine's anvil in the blacksmith's shop not far away, was the only outer noise that came to them, save the humming of bees and the occasional crowing of a cock. The barn seemed full of a soft, dusky darkness that stirred as they moved in the soft hay. There was a faint patter and scampering of feet far below as a mouse ran across the floor. They could hear it plainly in the intense stillness.

Donald looked at the girl before him. She was between him and the light from the opening, so that she looked all dark in silhouette, sitting very upright against the white glare of the sky. He seemed to see her suddenly for the first time. "What does she do with herself all the time?" he thought. "Why hasn't she any one to look after her—any one besides that old woman?" He turned towards her and the soft hay crumpled under him.

"Aren't you lonely here? Don't you ever get tired of life here day in and day out? Don't you ever want to change?"

She looked at him gravely, reflectively.

"Sometimes I do," she said slowly.

He took a wisp of the hay and drew it between his teeth.

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"Why don't you marry Mark Wetherell?" he asked suddenly.

She gave him a quick glance, and for an instant dropped the thick veil of her lashes over her eyes.

"Well?" he said.

"I—I don't love him enough." It was spoken very low and hesitatingly.

"But I thought you were so fond—" He paused. She had turned and looked at him. For a moment her dark grey eyes gazed straight at him. He could not see her perfectly, because he was facing the light, but he knew that their look was not all surprise, and he hesitated, dropping his own eyes to the hay-strewn floor.

The sun, with a final, all-embracing blaze, sank below the barn. In the cool seclusion of the loft he moved a trifle nearer her.

"Marian," he said gently, "am I to blame?"

She bent her head slowly, thoughtfully. There was neither denial nor concealment in her attitude.

"But—but why should that be? Why should you let that influence you—that mere boy-and-girl affair?"

"It was that to you," she said.

"Ah, but I meant it at the time!"

"Yet you forgot me."

"Marian," he said, "did you really care for me?"

"A long time ago."

"And now?"

Something stirred in her—some vibrant emotion. She knew that she still loved him, that nothing had ever really changed her, knew it by the queer quickening of her pulses at his words. What if this were her chance—her chance to have him back again? It might not mean much to him but to her—

They were sitting very close together, silent, waiting.

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The day deepened. Far away, over towards Tonomet, a church bell began ringing, lazily, dreamily, its faint tinkle, tinkle, bringing back to them poignant memories of Sabbaths of their youth. The sun had left the garden; and the cottage stood white and blank beyond the gates of the stable yard. A faint flutter of pigeons' wings winnowed the air as the birds settled in the eaves of the farthest barn. A silence heavy and throbbing succeeded.

Donald turned to the girl at his side. A faint memory had awakened in him—the memory of a night on the seashore, but not clearly, not visible to his inward eye. Yet once, ah, once—

“Marian,” he asked, “what happened?”

She opened her hands in a pitiful little gesture of questioning. She needed no explanation of his somewhat cryptic utterance.

“I don't know. I've never known. I wrote you—you never answered, never came—”

“Never came—” he repeated dully. “Never came where?”

“Why here, that night I asked you to come here. I waited for you as I said I would down by the gate—”

“But when? How long ago? When was all this?”

She looked at him with large dark eyes; the colour crept into her cheeks.

“The night after you had been here to call, when—when we were all so horrid.”

It sounded childish but he did not smile.

“And you say you asked me to come and I didn't?”

“Yes, I wrote you. I know it went, for I mailed it myself.”

“But, dear, I never got it.”

She was silent, confused, thinking. This explanation had never occurred to her.

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"Marian," Donald said suddenly, "was Connie there—at the house, I mean—at the time?"

She reflected a moment, trying to remember.

"Yes, I think so. Yes, I know she was there, because it was just before that that she asked me to come to see her and I couldn't go."

"I see."

He was silent again. In an instant, as if it had been yesterday, the whole scene flashed before him. Connie standing in the hall, fluttering uneasily, the strange light of excited eagerness in her eyes, her nervous manner. . . . He had wondered. . . . What was it she had asked . . . that he play bridge? He had even wondered at that; she hated bridge—particularly with such players as his father and mother. Nothing would induce her to play with the old Colonel now.

He turned to the girl at his side. He did not tell her about Connie and his suspicions, but she guessed. He only said:

"Did it make such a great difference to you then?"

"Not then. I was only hurt. But I trusted you still. It was later—"

"Ah!" he said. He leaned forward and caught her hand in his. His voice was very tender. "But you must know I wouldn't have hurt you like that! You must know that I did care—" He paused. He could see her face more clearly now, the resolute lifted chin, and the proud little mouth. Proud, that yet once had yielded to his kisses. Ah, once! Had he been indeed a blind, unseeing fool all these years?

"I suppose I ought not to have told you," she was saying.

"No, no, it is better. Now at last we know."

"But what's the use—now?"

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"Now?" he cried, "now?" And he laughed a little. "What does it matter if it's now or then or another time? What does anything matter but that we know how much we are to each other; that we've come together again; that I've found out about you and that you've forgiven me? For you have forgiven me, haven't you?"

He knelt beside her, putting his arms about her and drawing her farther back into the interior of the loft, away from the opening.

She felt her pulses quickening at his words, felt, with a strange emotion of happiness, his arms stealing about her body and the subtle thrill of physical contact as her cheek brushed his coat.

She was conscious of all this—loving it—yet she drew back, pulling away from him, pressing herself back against the rough wall of the loft.

But she could not move far from him. He was still close to her, whispering words of endearment in her ear. He stooped and kissed the long line of her neck where the pale golden hair began to grow. There was something strangely sweet, strangely familiar, and yet terrifying in his embraces, his nearness. Ah! she must not! She must not!

She was thinking stubbornly of Connie and the fact that he was Connie's husband. She was telling herself that it was all wrong, wrong! Yet she was thinking why should she give him up? Connie had cheated her. Connie had stolen him from her. Why should she care about Connie? For a wild moment she felt her defences slipping from her, felt herself unable to cope with this new, strange joy; so that that still white splendour of innocence in which she had always seemed to him to stand enfolded faded, and he caught her to him. He felt only her cheek, soft as the petal of a flower, felt her lips

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crushed against his, soft and yielding, knew again the exquisite thrill of conquest in the frightened murmur of the words of protest he heard but would not heed. He bent low, whispering words of love, of passion, rapturous words, unreckoned words—

“Darling! Darling! Darling! You do love me, you do!”

“Don’t say that! Ah, don’t say that!”

“But it’s true!”

“No, no!”

“But it is, I know it is. Tell me.”

She hesitated. Some such moment as this must have come to her mother, some such moment when the question was before her whether or not to take the joy that offered. If she were to assent would it be hers now at last, the joy she had missed, the sweetness and the wonder she had looked forward to all those weary years of her childhood? Yes, some such moment must have come to her mother, and her mother had decided.

She looked at Donald but she did not really see him. What she saw was Ted Chamberlayne going down the road towards Whitridge with the shabby suit-case in his hand, his coat worn, greenish, with its frayed collar. There could be no resemblance there to the dapper young man beside her, yet this was the vision that came to her as she gazed at Donald’s handsome head; and a slight shiver shook her. She drew away, gently, firmly.

“I can’t, Donald, I can’t!”

He dropped his arms disappointed.

“Then you don’t love me.” It was more a statement than a question, yet she rallied to answer it.

“No, Donald dear, not any more.”

It was the first lie she had ever told.

He drew back, chagrined, rueful, almost sulky. He did

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not see how her fingers were tight clenched in her hands, nor how her lips trembled.

"There was a time when you did—when you cared a lot."

"Yes, there was a time."

He took a wisp of hay in his hands and tied it angrily into knots. He stopped and looked at her more closely from under brooding brows.

"And I believe you do now."

She shook her head. "Not now, Donald, it was too long ago." She felt her strength coming back. "You—you musn't be so ridiculous! Why, you would have staged quite a scene here if I had let you!"

Her voice sounded absurdly false and hollow in her own ears. How could it ever deceive him? But it did, apparently; for he turned his eyes away. He looked unhappy. Had her words hurt him? Ah, how she hated to hurt him! Her own eyes filled with tears and she sat up, smoothing the dust and fragments of hay from her dress lest he should see.

"Well, I must be going."

He stood up, towering above her where she still knelt at his feet.

She looked up timidly.

"But we'll still be friends, Donald?"

"Friends!" He laughed. "Yes, if you like. Have it your own way."

He went away from her down the ladder and out through the stable yard. There was still with him the sense of kissing her, the touch of the soft, smooth skin, the scent of her hair and the momentary clinging of her lips. For a space she had loved him, if only for a space. Could it have been over so quickly? Was it the truth she had told him when she said all that was over? Or

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did she love him still and only deny it lest they betray one another? Was she only acting, then?

Perhaps. But she was right. The intoxicating sense of her nearness, of her touch, was still with him but he knew that it would not last. Marian was right. He must go back to Connie. Connie was a girl after his own heart, no subtleties, no overrighteous principles. With the other it was different. How to soothe her fears, her qualms and scruples would be an ever recurring problem. He would never be able to live up to her. And in truth the situation was impossible. Things like that were sure to leak out. It was well nigh impossible to pursue a path such as the one indicated without sooner or later coming a cropper. Yes, it was better to let the matter drop before it really began!

He whistled as he walked along the road towards home, and snapped at the grasses with his stick. Yes, it was better so. Yet there was present with him the idea that he had missed something; that something was gone from him, an old memory, perhaps; a vague and lovely dream. Was it a child standing, white and beautiful, in the moonlight by the seashore? But he could not recall it clearly. Was she gone indeed, or had she never been?

3

From her ærie in the hayloft Marian watched him go, watched him swing out through the stable yard, past the white wall of the cottage, disappear among the green trees and bushes of the driveway; and it was as if something went out of her life.

She turned to still the crying voice within her, the voice that bade her run out after him, follow him down the road, call him back to her. It was difficult this comforting.

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"He would have taken me as easily as that!" she told herself bitterly.

Yet it did not help, only made the pain greater. Over and over she recounted their few short words together, over and over whispered that it was now too late. She had done the right thing but at what a cost! Was there anything, anything in life to make it up to her?

The night crept on and still she sat there, crouched in the warm hay. A star came out and gleamed wanly in the still rosy heavens. A little, singing wind rose suddenly in the garden and fluttered through the trees about the yard. The scent of flowers drifted in through the open door. There came to her a robin's sleepy call and the sound of the pigeons settling down to rest in the far barn, soft cooings and flutterings. Then, very far away, the faint, shrill whistle of a train—

Suddenly, with a little broken cry, she flung herself face downward in the hay and buried her face in her arms.

CHAPTER XVI

I

DONALD walked into his wife's upstairs sitting room on a day in early October at about five in the afternoon. It was his mother's old boudoir which Connie had appropriated to herself, and the furniture and contents of the room had been changed to suit her own taste. Donald found it a rather pleasanter room than in the old days.

He had come in from a long ride and looked forward with enjoyment to a late cup of tea and an hour's pleasant chat with Connie. There were only themselves at home now, and he found the quiet and solitude decidedly pleasant after a round of more or less tiresome house parties.

But Connie, if she had indulged in tea that afternoon, had long since finished, for there was no sign of the usual paraphernalia about. Although it was a warm day, there was a fire burning on the hearth and the room was stuffy. Connie sat morosely curled up in a corner of the long sofa, her eyes vacantly staring at the glowing embers in the grate.

"Well," said Donald shortly, "you don't look very cheerful here. It's close; why not have some air in?"

There was positive distaste expressed in the face Connie raised to his. She looked back at the crackling fire without speaking.

Donald came over to her, stood behind her, leaning over the back of the sofa. He looked at her more closely.

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Connie's eyes were red with weeping. He questioned her but she would vouchsafe no explanation.

Donald went downstairs again and mixed himself a whiskey and soda at the dining-room sideboard. He felt rather put upon and out of sorts. Why should Connie sulk like that? He had come home full of good humour and had tried to cheer her but she would have none of his comforting. Well, she must get over it as best she could then.

Connie appeared at dinner cold and indifferent. She ate scarcely anything. Her mood of perverse estrangement continued for several days. Donald shrugged his shoulders and went philosophically about his business.

There was the new heating plant to see about, one or two tenant houses that needed repairs; his mind was really occupied with other things. Although always, back of his preoccupation, he was conscious that there was something wrong with Connie. Poor girl! Perhaps she was tired of Whitridge. It was dull unless they kept the house packed with guests all the while and that was a bore. Perhaps he was a trifle tired of village life himself. At all events he hit upon a plan for raising Connie's spirits as well as amusing himself. He found her alone in the drawing-room one evening just before dinner and broached his little idea.

"I thought we might run out to California again for a few months and possibly go on to Japan. I've nothing in particular to keep me here just now. The governor's so well settled for the time being, and I've been feeling a bit restless. What do you say?"

He had suggested it casually, but he expected to see Connie's eyes shine, and hear an enthusiastic acclamation; but Connie sprang back, her little fists tight clenched, indignation flashing from her eyes.

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"You beast! How can I go?"

Donald stared. "But—but why in Heaven's name can't you?"

Connie flushed darkly and dropped her eyes.

"A pretty thing you've done to me—you—"

And all of a sudden Donald understood.

"Connie!" he cried, "you don't mean it!"

She gave him a scornful look.

"But—but, I say, that's fine!" he gasped, "that's great! What's the matter? Why do you look like that? Do you mean you don't want it?"

She looked at him with black fury in her eyes.

"Want it! Who would? Did we plan for anything like this? Want it! If I knew how to get rid of it without hurting myself I'd do it."

Donald frowned. "Connie, don't talk like that."

Connie laughed. "Oh, yes, you can pretend you're shocked. You can afford to be. It's all very well for you! You don't have to be shut up in the house for months and months, and then perhaps die at the end. You don't have any of the bother of it. You don't have to wait and suffer and suffer! It's all right for you. You can go off to Japan—".

"Connie," he pleaded, "don't get so excited. It's all right. It will turn out splendidly. We won't go away, either of us. We'll stay right here until it's over. We'll wait a year and then take the—the little fella with us. You'll love it then, Connie, I know you will. You will now, as soon as you get used to the idea."

But Connie pouted angrily and refused to listen to any softening of her sentence.

"A lot you know about it!" was all she would say; nor was Donald able, in the months that followed, to shake her firm conviction that she was doomed to die.

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"So that you can marry that horrid Pritchard girl!" she said once spitefully.

Donald laughed, patted her shoulder and turned away. He did not tell her that Marian and he had taken to riding together again. He knew that it would only annoy her and make her more than ever dissatisfied with her condition. Best to let things like that come out by themselves if they had to; if not, so much the better. Yet in his way he was patient and considerate of Connie at this time.

2

Donald's son was born on the sixteenth of May.

He was a poor little mite of a thing weighing only six pounds. Nevertheless, Connie had a very serious time bringing him into the world. She was ill for a long time.

"Never again!" were the first words she said when the mists of oblivion caused by the chloroform they gave her cleared away. And decidedly she meant it.

She cared for the child dutifully and resentfully. She refused flatly to nurse him, and indeed it would have been out of the question in any case, for her strength was not equal to the task. She was very delicate, but the fine flower of her loveliness had increased. The soft, satiny skin, ivory white now in place of the old high colour, looked transparent, as if letting through faint glimpses of a beautiful soul within. The violet shadows under her eyes increased their apparent size and blackness, and the pastel-hued negligées she affected gave an added touch of ethereal loveliness. To any eyes she would have seemed charming. To Donald, relieved at last from the fearful anxiety he had been in on her account, she was marvellously perfect. He felt again the affection he had

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had for her in the early days of their marriage. He hovered about her like a lover.

Perhaps it was in a measure Connie's indifference to him at this time that influenced him—for Connie had not quite forgiven him, even yet, the pain he had caused her; perhaps it was merely gratitude on his part for the son she had given him. For Donald was proud and pleased at his fatherhood. He held the little atom of humanity with its strange likeness to himself, in his arms, dangling it, laughing, speaking foolishly to it; and, as Connie said, generally acting like an idiot, until her own bright eyes and engaging loveliness lured him away from the child's cradle to her side.

Donald was happy. Indeed, during his whole life he had but very rarely, and then only incidentally, been anything else; but he was especially happy now. He made endless plans for Connie and the baby and himself.

He had not forgotten Marian. He rode with her still and he was fond of her. Moreover, he was grateful to her for her handling of that little incident of last summer which had cropped up so suddenly, and which might have proved so awkward later on. He did not say to her, "You were right that time when you turned me down. I shouldn't have proved a faithful lover—how could I, being myself and under present circumstances?" but that was in truth his present attitude. Outwardly they were as he had promised—friends.

Yes, at this time Donald was a model husband, happy, carefree, a trifle more boisterous than formerly, witty, gay, watched over by Fate, a darling of the gods. There came to him no shadow of anxiety, even despite the fact that before Connie's motherhood was accomplished America had entered the World War.

Yet the matter seemed far off, remote, not a thing of

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immediate, vital importance like little Dick's (they had named the child Richard after Connie's father) first attempts at a definite personality, or the clutching grasp of his tiny fingers.

Connie, still immersed in the pleasures of being an invalid, took only a passing interest in the world events of the day. She had forgotten a long-ago conversation she had once had with Kenneth Disbrow. Now that the situation he then suggested had occurred, now that the country was actually at war, Connie assumed, nonchalantly, that Donald could have no intention of going.

Naturally, he couldn't go away and leave her in her present state and with little Dick to look after, too. The idea was too preposterous for Connie to consider even. She smiled wisely and superiorly when women of her acquaintance, discussing possibilities, said gushingly: "My dear, what *would* you do if your husband had to go?"

Connie knew better than that. Donald had never had to do anything he didn't want to and never would; and she was quite sure he wouldn't want to do anything like this. Nor would she herself consent if he did. It was not love for her husband that made her take this stand, but because she had no desire to be deserted thus early in her married life.

Besides, they said life in the trenches, aside from the danger, was perfectly *filthy*, and Donald was always so particular about his personal habits. No, indeed, it wouldn't do at all.

Donald himself reassured her on the subject once or twice. No, he wouldn't go until they made him, anyway. For her further satisfaction he assumed the coward.

"There's no one would run quicker than I would if I once saw a 'bloody Boche' coming towards me, you can

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bet. They'd find that out in an instant in the army. You needn't worry. I'd never get further than a training camp, anyway—that is, if I weren't shot as a deserter before then."

Connie smiled and was content. She accorded him the first real show of affection since the baby's birth; and welcomed him to her arms as a reward for his constancy to herself. For she did not misunderstand his little pretense in regard to his lack of valour—although she may have pretended to believe him—may even have allowed it to tinge with a faint contempt her present thoughts of him.

3

In the meantime Mark Wetherell had entered the first training camp to be organised. Before he left to begin his earnest task of fitting himself for the army, he sought out Marian, alone once more at the cottage; for Aunt Julia had been prevailed upon to repeat her last year's visit to Miss Purvis.

She received him in the little cottage parlour.

"Marian, you've heard I'm going away?"

"Yes, I know. I think it's so brave of you. I'm awfully proud!"

"Proud?"

"Yes. To know you—to be a friend of yours."

They sat together in the darkened room saying little, thinking only of the coming parting and all it might forefend. The golden days of their companionship were over—for a long, long time to come. Both felt that as they murmured responses and spoke of the careless idle things that only yesterday had seemed so important and to-day were less than nothing. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away the precious minutes remorselessly; the sound

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of Danny Devine's anvil punctuated the stillness at irregular intervals. For all the eager excitement in Mark's eyes the meeting was melancholy.

He sat looking at her with those steady blue eyes as though he would fasten her image on his brain forever. But it was not alone the Marian of to-day he saw—but of all their days together. One after another there passed before his mind's eye pictures of her—Marian a little girl in a brown gingham frock holding a tiny grey kitten to her breast; Marian scudding along the beach with Donald and himself, her fair hair flying; Marian holding Nance's head to the sea in the face of the dashing spray when the wind whipped chill across the grey wastes of water; Marian standing in the mellow moonlight on the dunes below Hodder's Beach with the lights of Tonomet arching behind her—

"You're my oldest friend," Marian was saying softly. "I knew you even before I knew Donald. And you were always kind!"

"Who wouldn't be kind to you, Marian?"

"Some people haven't been. Oh, Mark, why am I talking this way! I know it's wrong of me. I ought to send you away happy—"

"You could, Marian."

She flushed suddenly and dropped her eyes; the colour crept into her cheeks.

"You mean—?"

"Marry me, Marian. Can't you bring yourself to marry me? I shouldn't ask much. I know you don't love me. But then lots of people do marry without it—or with love only on one side. I'd be content."

"Oh, Mark, that wouldn't do. I couldn't! And it isn't true that I don't care for you. That's what makes it so hard—I do care so much!"

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"I shouldn't ask much," he repeated. "And I'm going away. I may never come back. It's six to one I don't. And anyway, I'd be away a long time. So it wouldn't be an endless sentence. I might set you free sooner than you think."

"Oh, Mark! Please, please don't talk like that!"

"Then you don't think you could?"

"You make me feel such a brute!"

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't mean to do that."

"But you do. You make it so hard for me. And I don't understand why you should want me like that—without love." Her voice was very low and sorrowful.

"I don't know either, Marian, but I do. I ask myself that sometimes when I'm alone; when I find myself thinking about you and wondering what you're doing. I ask myself why I want you so much when you don't care a hang about me. Why I don't go away somewhere and forget all about you."

"And don't you ever find the answer?"

"There isn't any answer except that I love you."

"Oh, Mark!"

"Well, it's true."

"But, Mark, think! After all, it would mean so little if I married you now, like this. It wouldn't be fair—to you."

"It would if I knew about it and went into it with my eyes open. I've told you that would do." His tone was dogged.

She considered his words a moment. Then she shook her head.

"No, Mark, it wouldn't do. I'd have to feel it myself."

"And you don't?"

He sighed.

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They were silent, staring at each other across the little room. Marian rose and walked over to the window where the blinds had been closed against the afternoon sun. She saw the garden through the slanted shutters, lying still and peaceful beyond. There was a great pain and tenderness in her heart.

"I suppose I thought I could persuade you to love me later," Mark said suddenly, evidently following some line of thought of his own.

"I don't know. I suppose I'm a fool. Forgive me, Marian. I'm always bothering you and then being sorry for it. It's good of you to be so patient with me. I'm afraid I'm a fearful nuisance. You'll be glad to be rid of me."

It struck deeper pain into her heart to see him thus trying to make light of the matter.

She raised her hands suddenly with a little gesture of weariness.

"Oh, Mark, Mark! Don't you see, I would do it if I could—if it were a possible thing for me to do so without being false to you and false to myself. I care for you, Mark, so very much—truly I do—that I couldn't do you this wrong. It is wrong, it is! I feel that it is—even—even when you're going away—" her voice faltered and broke.

He crossed suddenly to her side and took the plaintive, yielding hands in both of his.

"Marian darling, it's all right. Don't worry any more; it's all right, dear. God! how many times I seem to have said that to you before. I'm a cad, a rotter, to have bothered you like this! But I promise you I won't ask you again, not—not unless you tell me you want me to. And you won't do that, will you?"

He laughed lightly and dropped her hands.

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“And now good-bye, dearest—for you are my dearest, even if I’m not to tell you so again. I’m off almost at once. You’re not to have any false regrets or qualms of conscience after I’ve gone. You’ve done the best you could for me and it’s all right. You understand that, don’t you? Because I’m a pig-headed fool is no excuse for your worrying. Good-bye, dear. You’ll give me a kiss for old times’ sake? And promise to write me sometimes and tell me how things are at home. I’ll send you my address at once. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. Don’t look so sad. Who knows? I may even forget you after all. Remember me to Miss Julia. Good-bye. . . .”

She went with him only as far as the parlour door, When he was gone she turned back again to the window to watch him going down the drive, tilting the shutters upward so that she might see him as long as possible. But he did not look back.

CHAPTER XVII

I

IT was something of a surprise to Connie to hear, somewhat later in the summer, from Kenneth Disbrow.

He wrote that he was stationed at a training camp not many miles beyond Tonomet, engaged in teaching the young idea how to shoot, likely to be there for some time and generally wretched because Fate had consigned him to this uncongenial occupation when he would so much rather have gone overseas to fight. He would like, he said, to run over and pay his respects some time in the near future.

Connie was both surprised and pleased, and felt the revival of a quite unusual interest. In the interval of bearing her child she had, in fact, quite forgotten about Kenneth Disbrow. His reappearance in her life came at an opportune time. She was bored with the life around her, tired even of playing invalid, dull and vaguely depressed. Social life—even what there was of it in Thornton and Whitridge—had perceptibly fallen off since the proclamation of war. No one talked anything else; it was stupid. Connie welcomed the diversion offered by Disbrow's note with eager anticipation.

She sent him a cordially worded invitation to come whenever he could, and by all means to spend his next leave with them at the Hall.

Disbrow arrived within a week of receiving her letter, resplendent in his uniform.

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Connie had meant to gather together a few old friends on the occasion of his visit, but he came so unexpectedly that only Maisie Littell was there—to amuse Donald, as Connie told Disbrow confidentially. The four of them made a merry party over the week-end. They electrified the villagers by appearing suddenly in the quiet streets in the most fashionable of motor cars, the girls dressed in their most daring costumes, and with loud talk and laughter showing a contemptuous disregard for the homely village people, who stared in open-mouthed wonder at this display of arrogance and magnificence.

Marian saw them once or twice on these occasions, but she was not asked up to the Hall during the visit; and if Disbrow recognised her again it must have been that he had completely forgotten her former attraction for him.

He left with a promise to return at the first opportunity. He found it a few weeks later. It was, it appeared, surprisingly easy for him to get away from camp for short visits.

Maisie had gone by the time of this second visit and Donald was busy with some new farm buildings. He was taking more of an interest in the place than he used, perhaps because, due to little Dick's arrival, they had remained there for a longer time together than ever before. He was much concerned about the new buildings and matters in connection with them took up a good deal of his time. Connie and Disbrow were, therefore, necessarily largely dependent on each other for amusement and entertainment.

They had been one day for a long drive through the country—beautiful in its varied tapestry of green, warm and luxuriant—and were resting after it in the cool drawing-room close to the open French windows.

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They sat side by side on the sofa. Disbrow, his bold, handsome eyes fixed on Connie with admiring directness, was idly twisting the ends of her sash as it lay between them on the sofa. Connie glanced down at his moving fingers.

"I say, Kenneth, don't spoil my sash."

"Ah, why so particular? Am I injuring it?"

"You're mussing it up."

He went on playing with it, flapping the loose ends over his fingers.

"How do you think it would look braided?"

"Don't you dare!"

"No?" He began deliberately plaiting the thin silky strands.

"You'll have to take it all out again," Connie threatened.

"Shall I?" He raised his eyes for a moment to hers, those bold handsome eyes that always discomfited her a bit—rather pleasantly—that gave her somehow the feeling of being strangely powerless whenever she encountered them.

Disbrow's gaze swept over her and Connie flushed delicately. She felt almost angry with herself; she had not meant to blush then. Why should she? Yet something in Kenneth's look had momentarily disconcerted her, had made her feel rather—rather—she could not express it exactly, but rather as if, for an instant, he had seen her without any clothes on.

She reached out her hand and pulled the sash from his fingers. He let the silken cords go, but caught her hand instead and held it there outspread between them.

"Why did you blush like that just now?" he asked.

"Did I?" Connie's tone was one of innocent surprise. "What made you think so?"

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A glint of amusement lighted his eyes.

"I saw it."

"Well—possibly."

"And I wondered why."

Connie shrugged.

"How can I tell? Do you think I turn my blushes on and off with a little tap inside me?"

"Yes, that's about what most people do. Only some one else usually turns the tap."

Connie turned from him. "Perhaps you struck mine by mistake. What's your interpretation?"

"I think it was because you thought of something."

"Yes? Of what?"

"I think you thought of how nice it would be if I— if I—"

"Yes?"

"Well, perhaps I'd better not say it."

Connie's eyes smiled mockingly as she looked back at him.

"Oh, do go on!"

"You'd like to hear it?"

"How can I tell that," she asked ingenuously, "unless I know something of what it's about?"

"And don't you?"

She shook her head emphatically; but Disbrow hesitated.

He had, for a long time, more or less looked forward to some such moment as this; but now that the time was come doubts assailed him. Did he really want her? And if so, was he right in supposing that he could if he tried? Was his the true interpretation of that unnamable something in Connie that made men wonder? Or had he, perhaps, made a hideous mistake?

He spoke his thought aloud: "If only I knew."

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"Knew what?"

"How much in earnest you were."

The bold, handsome eyes smiled again in hers, but more humbly, less victoriously, more pleadingly.

Connie looked down. She began plucking out the plaitings from the fringe of her silken sash. She didn't look up or answer.

"And if there wasn't your husband to consider," Disbrow continued.

"Oh, that!" Connie's tone was faintly contemptuous. "You needn't worry about Donald. Donald amuses himself."

An excuse, this? or an invitation? Disbrow leaned forward and raised the hand he held to his lips.

"You make me lose my head when you say things like that! I'm not responsible!"

An exhilarating little thrill ran all through Connie's body. Those many times when she had felt this man's potent influence came back to her with redoubled force. Indeed, she had been feeling it all during his visit. She was conscious of a fearful, pleasurable danger. It was like walking along the edge of a steep precipice with dizzy depths of unplumbed ecstasy below. It would take caution and restraint not to throw herself over.

And perhaps, after all, she did want to throw herself over. It was fun flirting with the danger, at any rate. Glorious to be able to bring that look, half of timid longing, half of bold possession, into her eyes. She laughed low and pleasantly.

"Ah, you say that to every girl; I know."

"Indeed I do not! Can't you see I don't even want to say it to you?"

"How disappointing! Why not?"

"It isn't the thing to say to you."

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"You are very virtuous!"

"Don't!" he cried. "Don't taunt me with the fact that I am helpless! hopeless! That I musn't make love to you; that it would be the part of a cad to tempt you!"

She lay back among her cushions and let her eyes wander to the open window, beyond which the green terrace and the lawn lay shimmering in the deep sunlight. She raised her hand over her head in a graceful, languorous gesture. She looked at him suddenly—daringly.

"Tempt me a little," she said.

And suddenly all those doubts and scruples and vague questionings which he had had concerning her resolved themselves into a vast certainty.

With a little low laugh he caught her to him, pulling her over to him along the couch with an urgency almost rough.

Connie pouted; and he laughed again—a laugh of possession.

"Don't draw away from me. Stay where you are. I like you like that; I want you there. . . . Kiss me. . . . Ah, I guessed it then. You do love me. . . ! Let yourself go . . . tell me . . . you wanted this . . . ? You have known all along I loved you. . . ? Tell me then. . . . You darling. . . ! You belong to me now. . . ."

A shadow flitted past the window. They looked up, saw Donald crossing the terrace on his way into the house, and slid apart.

2

Kenneth Disbrow continued to come on frequent visits to the Hall. He came when his host was there and when he was not. Sometimes there were other guests; sometimes he found Connie alone. And all the time, when-

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ever occasion offered, he and Connie continued their love-making.

It bore at first something of the nature of a daring, fascinating game, a matching of wits, a trial of strength against strength. As far as Connie was concerned it had been, in truth, largely a revolt against the irksome monotony of her surroundings.

But as time passed on the importance of the issue grew. Disbrow became more insistent; his passion was very like the real thing. Occasionally he even asked himself whether he were not actually in love with Connie. Connie herself felt quite sure of her love for Kenneth. Yet all the while they were both conscious of playing up to a scene. Comedy or tragedy, which should it be?

The blow fell on a warm August afternoon. Donald was away from home and Connie alone. Disbrow arrived unannounced. There was a strange suppressed excitement in his manner. His eyes, bold and fearless as ever, swept Connie with a new meaning. An hour after his arrival he told her:

"I'm going away. I've my orders at last. We're going over."

"Oh, Kenneth!" Connie's eyes gleamed suddenly soft with tears.

They stood close together in Connie's little upstairs sitting room whither she had taken him to "have a quiet talk" before dinner, she said. The fading light of the warm summer afternoon filtered in through the frail, filmy curtains at the windows. The air was faint with odours from the garden mixed with subtle perfumes from the little pots and jars on Connie's dressing table. Connie had set the scene to be intimate and provocative, but she had not expected this. His words fell like hammer strokes, sharpening their desire for one another,

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making clear their need to hasten. The sense of human impotence before the decrees of Fate overpowered them, and the futility of human plans struck upon their consciousness.

"Oh, Kenneth!" she said again.

He was silent, looking down at the shiny straps of his putties. Connie shot a look at him and felt, with a flutter of longing, how big and strong and handsome he was.

As if in answer to her unseen glance Disbrow spoke:

"You know what it means, Connie. I may not come back. This will be the last time I can see you. I won't be able to get another leave. I'm to go back to camp to-morrow."

A dizzy wave of self-pity swept over her, not love, not dread. Almost in a dream she felt Disbrow's arms come about her, felt his breath on her cheek as he drew her to him, knew the passionate touch of his lips and felt the muscles straining under his khaki coat as he pressed her closer and closer to him.

She leaned away from him looking deep in his eyes. He put his two hands on either side of her face to draw it up again to his; but she held him off, running her hands from his shoulders down his arms. He dropped them and caught her hands in his again, catching them up to his lips; and again she drew away. But in the end she let him kiss her.

"Connie," he whispered, "you couldn't be so cruel as to refuse me now! It's the last time, remember, the last time!"

His eyes burned into hers. Connie faltered. The dramatic moment, the witchery, the salt tang of adventure, but surely not love, made her whisper softly:

"Donald's away. I'm glad. At least we shall have to-night together!"

CHAPTER XVIII

I

IT has ever been the part of the cynical novelist to harp upon the unimportance of those slight events which influence our destiny. One is loath blindly to follow this lead—as one is not voluntarily a cynic, but the pose is often forced upon one. One struggles, one resists, but in the end one yields. Such are the limitations of mere tellers of tales.

Donald Callender came home wet and tired from an important business trip of several days' duration, one of many such he had taken of late. It was raining heavily and the car had failed to meet him at the railway station in Thornton as he had ordered.

After much running about in the wet he found John Pennyman to drive him up to the Hall in a rickety Ford without side curtains.

No one seemed to be about the house. He let himself in with a key and stood stamping and shaking the wet from his hat and shoulders in the big hallway. He was not in the most amiable frame of mind. Of any other man one would have said he was cross, only Donald so seldom let mischances—even that one of getting caught in the rain without proper clothing—really put him out of temper. No doubt the rain and the discomfort of his ride were but preliminary tests of his superiority in that respect. One should have a balancing mind.

A letter addressed to Connie, of which he thought he

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knew the handwriting, lay upon the hall table. Surprisingly it bore the postmark, New York. Disbrow, he thought, was at camp beyond Tonomet—indefinitely there, it would seem.

Donald stood looking at it, not overcurious about it, when a certain vivid recollection came to him—Connie standing in just about this spot in the hall, a brilliant fire blazing on the hearth, and the almost-knowledge he had later gained that she had, a moment before, thrown a letter to him, Marian's letter, on the flames. The whole little scene was clear before his memory.

Donald was not petty in spirit; but just now he was wet and uncomfortable. Ordinarily he would not have dreamed of such a thing as reading Connie's letter without her permission, but his present mood tempted him to do so. It was the same trick Connie had played on him years ago.

He had not meant to take any revenge for that old misdeed—if, indeed, he had been right in his assumption that there had been one—but with such an apt retaliation ready to his hand he wavered.

And where was Connie, anyway? She should have been here to greet him; she must have heard the car drive up. Doubtless because she was too indifferent. She had been acting rather strangely of late—ever since little Dick had come—cold and unaffectionate, as if she still bore him a grudge for that event. He decided he would pay her back by just glancing at the letter.

On the instant Donald ripped it open and began to read. He stood there for a long time, very quiet, very interested; so interested that a little trickle of water ran from his hat down into his neck but he did not notice it.

At last he put the letter, crumpled up, into his pocket

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and went upstairs, very quietly still, so as not to attract Connie's attention.

2

An hour later, bathed and dressed and with the letter still in his pocket, Donald presented himself before Connie.

She lifted a passive cheek for him to kiss, but Donald apparently did not see it, for he crossed at once to the far side of the room. Connie was content. She was not conscious of any particular desire for Donald's embraces.

"Been lonely while I was gone?" he asked.

Connie shrugged.

"Oh, so, so! I had some things to do."

She had not noticed anything odd in Donald's manner. There was a pause.

"Any one here?"

For the fraction of a second Connie's eyebrows contracted.

"Here? How do you mean?"

"I thought perhaps Disbrow might have run over."

"No, he wasn't here," Connie lied readily. An instant later she thought, "That's a mistake; any of the servants might tell him if he were to ask; I shouldn't have said that."

But Donald did not need to ask the servants. He turned back from the window. His face was rather white and set.

"Then why does he say he recalls your last time together—so short a while ago? He certainly wasn't here the week before. How does it happen that he fancies he was here?"

"How—do you mean? Where?" Connie faltered.

"Here, in this letter."

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He held it out to her, and Connie snatched it from his hand. It was not overlit in the room but even in the dimness damning phrases and sentences leapt out from the page to meet her startled eyes—"Good-bye . . . I shall always remember your lips, your eyes . . . ! the way you clung to me . . . the fact that at last you gave yourself—"

Connie closed her eyes dizzily. "Kenneth's a fool!" she thought angrily, as under Donald's watching eyes the man's folly forced itself painfully upon her consciousness. She glanced up at her husband and put the betraying letter defensively behind her.

"You've read this?"

Donald smiled, a hard, set smile, and slowly nodded.

"How dare you read my letters?" Connie's eyes flamed with indignation. "A pretty thing that is to do! What did you expect to find? You must have suspected something or you wouldn't have sneaked my letter. Well, now you know!"

Donald drew back a step. He felt stunned by her words; but somehow not hurt as he should have been. It was as if he were struggling desperately to feel hurt.

"You mean you acknowledge it?" he gasped.

"Well," said Connie sullenly, "if you've read this, then I suppose you know. You must know. Kenneth's a fool to write like that, but who would expect you to steal my letters!"

"It's true, then. I did think you would deny it at least, Connie," Donald said slowly.

She laughed mirthlessly. "What for? So you could have the pleasure of forcing the truth out of me. I've fooled you there, too, apparently. Yes, it's true. What are you going to do about it?"

"I—I don't know, yet." Donald could have laughed

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at his own pusillanimity. Where was that sublime indignation which made men kill women under like provocation? Not a trace of it could he feel; only that stunned surprise and a certain lingering incredulity.

"It's your own fault. You oughtn't to read my letters," said Connie slowly. She had been busy tearing the offending missive into little shreds, and now tossed them into the wastebasket. The fire in her seemed to have died out. She was very quiet, almost submissive.

Without answering her he turned and went, a trifle unsteadily, out of the room and downstairs to his own room on the ground floor. He was still wondering vaguely what he ought to do, trying to view the matter from all sides.

Connie was right. What had he expected? After all, it was funny if you looked at it in that way. He had meant to do Connie an ill turn and instead the blow had fallen on himself. It was true as Connie had said—he had himself to blame. There was something to be said for her. After all, one should have a balanced mind.

But to have her admit the charge so freely! The effrontery of the thing took his breath away. Why had he let Disbrow come there like that—so often, and whether he himself were there or not? He had been careless; he should have looked after his honour better. That was a point for Connie. One must weigh and judge. A thing like this couldn't be settled all in a moment.

3

Connie did not come down to dinner. She complained of a headache and sent down her excuses by a maid. Donald didn't care. He was glad she had the sense not to present herself before him.

He had to think what to do. Donald ate his lonely

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dinner still pondering the question. It revolved in his mind like a grievous problem that had to be solved. He tried to think of other things, but his mind kept coming back with fatal insistence to the one subject. He found himself thinking how desirable Connie was.

He spent the evening in the library. He had to think what to do. Once he went to the front door and looked out; it was still raining heavily—too bad to venture out. The rain fell in great gusts that hissed and spattered on the ground.

With a gesture of disgust he closed the door and went back to the library, but before he did so he went into the dining room and poured himself a large drink of whiskey. With the glass in his hand he came back to his old seat by the desk.

He sat there with his eyes straight before him, gravely ruminating, thinking of Connie and the thing she had told him. Did she love Disbrow? He shrugged. He thought not, but one could never tell.

Odd, disjointed reflections passed through his mind. This man Disbrow, had he not once or twice suspected him? Or had he trusted completely in Connie's innocence? Well, it was only once, and Disbrow was gone, probably for good. And he found himself remembering again Connie's charm and attractiveness. His mind went back to the night of his marriage. . . .

His glass was empty. He rose, went out into the dining room and refilled it. He tossed off the drink standing there at the sideboard. He came out into the hall again. The stairs rose a shadowy archway above him. He recalled seeing Connie on them a hundred times, her delicate draperies fluttering against the banisters, her soft, little white hand on the smooth mahogany rail.

He went to the foot of the stairs and stood there

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listening. There was no sound from up above. After a moment's hesitation he went, a trifle unsteadily, up the stairs.

Outside her room he paused. A crack of light showed under the door. She was still up, then. He went on down the hall to his own room, the one he had had ever since little Dick's advent.

He did not turn on the light but stood for some time at the darkened window, watching the raindrops scuttering against the pane and sweeping in gusty sheets over the flat porch roof. After a while he thought of Connie again.

With a half shake of impatience, he left the upstairs room and started to go back to the library. He would get a book or magazine and make himself read.

He had to pass Connie's door again on the way down. Before it he paused again. The crack of light beneath the door had vanished. The glossy handle of the knob flickered before him. Of course she would have locked it.

He turned the handle and opened the door. The room was in semi-darkness. Over in one corner the bed loomed shadowy and large. She was not in the room. The thin acrid odour of a lotion she sometimes used on her hair permeated the air. A light shining in from the dressing room and the sound of running water, told him she was there preparing for the night.

He closed the door again guiltily and went downstairs. He found his way to the sideboard and poured himself another drink—a good, stiff one. He swallowed it hastily and went back to the library. There he sat down and went over again the events of the afternoon, slowly, thoughtfully; and all the time Connie appeared to him more and more desirable. His hands moved restlessly,

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the fingers opening and closing upon one another. He thought of Connie continuously without interruption.

The whiskey seemed to have sharpened his perceptions; he could visualise with great distinctness. And more and more he could see the big white bed in the corner of the room upstairs. He thought of it until it began to grow larger and larger. . . . It seemed to crowd out the rest of the furniture. . . .

He went back to the sideboard and poured himself another drink.

At length he stumbled upstairs again. He went past the door of the bedroom. Then he turned back. He stood uncertain outside the door. He seemed to see the room clearly in spite of the closed door between; and the white bed in the corner loomed larger than ever.

He thought he would just try the door. Of course she would have locked it by now. Still he would just try. . . .

The knob yielded to his hand. It slipped softly under his fingers. The door slid gently open. All was dark within, but he could still see the bed standing, white and shadowy, in the corner. . . .

4

Donald and Connie sat opposite each other at breakfast. They were late this morning. Instinctively they avoided each other's eyes. Donald devoted himself to his coffee, pretending not to see the telegram lying beside Connie's plate.

With a half apology she tore it open and glanced over the contents. Having read it she tore the yellow slip into shreds and slid them under her plate. Characteristically she took the bull by the horns.

"It's from Kenneth. He has sailed. It's good-bye."

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There was silence. A maid came in with fresh toast. Donald took a slice, Connie refused. She waited for the girl to retire, then spoke again:

"For the rest," she said, "I suppose we may as well go on as we were."

He looked at her, perplexed, slightly puzzled. After all, there was no reason—

"Yes," he said slowly, "I suppose we might as well go on."

After all, one should have a balanced mind!

CHAPTER XIX

I

MARIAN and Donald had been riding together back into the country, past Lone Tree Hill and the pleasant fields that clustered below it. It was still early afternoon. The sun rode high in the heavens. Whitridge and its surrounding country lay basking in the mellow sunlight. Summer was not yet over.

They circled up past the crest of the hill which gave them, now and again, a far glimpse of the sea; and drew up, pausing for a moment, just on the first slope which looked towards Whitridge.

From somewhere down in the valley came the sound of music. A sleepy breeze fluttered the grasses at their feet. A row of wispy clouds flawed the impeccable blue of the horizon.

It was very quiet here on the hillside, only the humming of bees in the thick grass and the drums and fifes of the distant band, with a faint clicking of Nance's bridle now and then as she tossed her head and pricked her ears for the distant music.

They listened for a few minutes in silence.

"How pretty that is," Marian said at length.

"Yes; sounds attractive from here. Wonder what it is. Some recruiting band, I suppose."

They were silent again till Marian said: "War is a wonderfully inspiring thing."

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"Yes," he replied, "when they keep the band playing. But that's the trouble; they don't play all the time. If they did that I could go into battle joyfully—any time, if the band kept up. But I'd want to run when they stopped."

She smiled. She was not moved by the suggestion of cowardice contained in his words. She knew him better than that.

Nance stood very still; Marian sat up very straight on her back. The little row of white clouds hung stationary in their places. The sound of the distant music fluctuated, coming nearer as the breeze blew that way, fading as it passed.

"How quiet and peaceful it is! How different from what it must be over there."

He nodded. His eyes were fixed on the line of blue hills beyond.

"Marian, do you sometimes wonder why I haven't gone?"

"No," she said, "why should I wonder?"

"Well, there's Mark, for instance; he didn't hesitate."

She ran her fingers over her horse's neck and smoothed a burr from Nance's mane.

"Mark didn't have a wife and child."

"Do you think it's any easier to die because of that? I don't. All the more reason he should have his turn at it. You might say that I had had mine."

There was a pause while the triumphant strains of music drifted nearer. Nance shook her head and rattled the curb chains.

"You don't condemn me? Not a little?"

"Why should I judge?" she asked gravely.

"Tell me, if you were a man, you'd go?"

"Yes, but—"

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He laughed. "I'm not trying to force you into a confession. It's of no consequence. I was only wondering what another person's views would be."

She coloured faintly. "I have no right to have any views on such a subject. You might have a thousand reasons for not going, you might not have any reason except that you didn't want to go. Whose business is it but your own? Who, that isn't you, is capable of judging?"

"Oh, if it comes to that, I don't suppose any one *wants* to go."

"Oh, yes, they do. I'd want to—not from any sense of duty or even love of adventure—you may think it's easy for me to say that being a girl— But how can I tell? Perhaps it's because I'd have so little to lose if anything happened to me. But with you it—it's different!"

He looked at her and his eyes were unusually gentle. A smile, half thoughtful amusement, half tenderness, flickered on his lips.

"I'm afraid you've always given me credit for more courage than I actually possess. Of course, I might have to venture into the war, might be drafted; but if I weren't, tell me, Marian, would you want me to go?"

She hesitated longer than she meant before she said, very softly: "No."

He was still watching her with that unusual expression.

"By that," she added quickly, "I don't mean that I'd keep you back. I'm assuming, of course, that I was in a position to influence you. I should be proud and glad—in a way—if you went; but I shouldn't want you to go."

It was not Nance's sudden restless movement, but

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the look in Donald's eyes that made her say a second later :

"I think we'd better be getting back. I've a committee meeting at four at Mrs. Wetherell's. I promised to be there to arrange about some Red Cross work. I'm sorry."

He sighed, but followed her down the hill towards the village, forgetting the music and the still, summer day, the grassy hillside and his own idle dreams.

Coming from this way they approached Whitridge from the Thornton side. Almost at the entrance to the village they came upon a small mass of people clustered together along the road.

"What's this?" Donald asked.

A policeman—the only one in Whitridge—had held up, with a magisterial hand, three or four automobiles. Some men were marching down the street on the left-hand side.

Donald and Marian drew over to the side of the road and pressed forward even with the first car. The policeman, Tim Murphy, saw them and nodded affably. He was rather impressed with a sense of his own importance to-day. It was not often he had the authority to stop strange cars in Whitridge.

Suddenly the band broke out afresh. And down the street the boys came marching, young boys, holding their heads high, marching with quick, unaccustomed steps.

"They're on their way to camp. They're the new soldiers," some one whispered.

The sun shone hot and steady; the green trees rustled overhead and made dark patterns on the white road and on the shoulders of the boys as they marched by. Young boys with fresh, pink cheeks and clear, courageous eyes.

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Many of them were leaving Whitridge or Tonomet for the first time. They were gay with a strange suppressed gaiety, excited, as if it were all a great adventure. They swung themselves proudly along, almost swaggering; they felt themselves the heroes of the hour. So they were, but afterward . . . !

Marian sat upright on her horse, a quick, eager sympathy stirring in her heart as she watched them march by, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Gallant lads and food for powder—

Ah! the pity of it, and yet the glory of it!

Tim Murphy, the little policeman, was wild with excitement. He could not keep up with the salutations and adieus showered upon him. "Good-bye, Tim!" they called to him, "good-bye! Take care of yourself!" They all knew him. Why shouldn't they? They had grown up in Whitridge; had lived there all their lives. Their relatives and friends were there in the crowd which straggled after them. They were watching with proud, admiring eyes. They were joyfully acclaiming their own: "There's Dick! There's Harry!" It was wonderful!

Yet the outstanding figure of them all was little Tim Murphy. Was he not there before them, even now holding back a flock of rich motor cars, proudly, with overbearing greatness, to let them go by?

It was their day—theirs! and they held their heads high and looked about them with lofty, jovial glances. The farewell meeting in the Town Hall had been for them, the speeches, the music, the cheering line of spectators was for them. It was all theirs—to-day!

They had passed; they were gone down the long, shaded street towards Thornton and the railway station. Tim

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Murphy, looking suddenly of no importance, like a toy balloon with the wind let out of it, signed with a melancholy gesture to the traffic to proceed.

Marian and Donald drew well over to the side of the road. The little cluster of cars bustled by them and were gone on their several ways. The two riders walked their horses slowly through the clouds of dust. Tim Murphy shook his head and waved a depressed salute. The music of the band still sounded, growing fainter.

Donald did not look at the girl by his side, but he knew how bright and shining were her eyes, in spite of the little droop of her lips.

"By George! It gets one, doesn't it, a scene like that?"

She was silent. She was thinking, "I wonder how many of those boys will come back? They're so young. It's all so gay. They don't realize—"

They rode on silently towards Marian's cottage. At length Donald spoke again:

"Do you know, I've never seen it quite in that light before. Of course, I've seen other men go, known it and considered it, but it never impressed me the way this has—never brought it home to me in the same way. It really *is* glorious!"

"There's another side than the glory," said Marian slowly, a weight gathering in her heart.

He laughed and threw back his head.

"After all, it's the big show!"

They did not speak on the subject again until they had turned in at the driveway of the cottage and ridden up to the porch. He lingered a while, standing with the horses below the steps, patting Nance's nose and admiring the late flowers in the little garden before the house. Marian, watching him from the steps above, thought she had

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never seen him so handsome, so debonair, so unconcerned with the seriousness of life.

He looked up with a half smile playing upon his lips. "Marian, do you know what I'm going to do? Enlist. That absurd little procession to-day decided me."

"Enlist?" she repeated in a dizzy surprise, "enlist?" And suddenly she knew what it was she had subconsciously feared a while ago. "When?"

"Oh, at once, of course. What's the use of waiting?"

"But—but not like this. Not yet. You haven't considered—"

He laughed. "Don't have to. That's the way I do things. Of course, I don't know just how soon I can get off. Oh, I don't mean I'm going to-night! I dare say Connie'll raise the devil! But I'm off. I'll come to say good-bye, though. I'll go as soon as they'll let me, but I've no doubt there'll be the devil and all of delays. Even clever as I am I don't believe they will give me command of the army at once! Well, so long. Wish me luck!"

"I do," she said. "Indeed I do!"

"And don't let's talk about it any more, there's a good girl. Good-bye!"

He was gone with a clattering of hoofs down the drive. Marian led Nance around to the stables. She went into the house by the back door, a dull, heavy sensation marking her footsteps. Yet underneath quivered a strange, vibrating excitement. She wondered what Connie would say when she heard the news, and was glad he had told herself first. She was proud and glad, she said over and over. It was exactly what she had said to Mark, months before; but somehow her present emotion was different—more acute. Nothing could ever keep Donald from holding first place in her heart!

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2

Donald Callender was as good as his word. Less than a month found him away from Whitridge on the commencement of his great adventure.

As he had prophesied, Connie raised the devil, but Donald laughed and followed his own inclination. His approaching departure gave Connie an increased appreciation of his value, yet even her newly reawakened affection and endearments failed to turn him from his resolve. He knew Connie pretty well now; a little fond, a little vain, wholly egotistical and frankly selfish; small wonder that her desires influenced him very slightly.

Connie had many fears—among them that Colonel Callender might want to come and stay with her when Donald was gone. He had taken such a ridiculous fancy to little Dick! It was most annoying and inconvenient. Connie had a great deal to worry her at this time, and complained bitterly.

Yet Donald laughed and smilingly protested that she would find matters much the same with himself gone or there in Whitridge with her. He would take no really serious view of the situation.

He went, as he promised, to say good-bye to Marian. Yet there was nothing particularly romantic in the simple farewell. Aunt Julia was present at the interview, and although Marian walked with him down to the gate, no word was spoken which might not have been heard by any one.

When he was gone she thought of him constantly. He wrote to her and she enjoyed his letters, looking forward to them with eagerness, both before and after he went to France. A few extracts from these letters will suffice:

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"It's a queer life but rather jolly on the whole [he wrote]. I've no doubt it will get tiresome after a while, but so far the novelty of it all amuses me. . . . You should see me drilling! I'm a wonder at it! As for taking orders you won't believe it but I fairly eat 'em up. You wouldn't know me. In giving them I've acquired a rasp in my throat that strikes terror to the stoutest heart in the regiment!"

And somewhat later:

"Hurrah! Here we are in France at last, though I'm not allowed to tell you where. Does it surprise you to know that Mark and I are in the same battalion? Or would you call me bromidic if I remarked that 'it's a small world'? Well, we are together here, although I don't see a great deal of him. He's a cut above me, you know, on account of rank, so I daren't presume. I know his servant, though."

And later still:

"Do you know, I feel like being tremendously sentimental to-night. No doubt you'll think me a puling fool, but if anything were to happen to me (what a euphemistic way of saying it that is, isn't it? Rather absurd if you stop to consider it!), however, if it should, I wish you'd keep an eye on little Dick. Also, try to cheer my father up when he comes to Whitridge. I know he misses me."

But most of his letters were in a lighter vein. Mark wrote her, too, very often; long letters full of news of the camp and of the march, clever, humorous sketches of French village life, glimpses of the everyday habits and

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characteristics of the men; weird, unnatural tales of the rats and the mud and the dirt, that made light of the discomforts yet painted most graphic pictures to the mind of his reader. She looked forward with eagerness to both their letters.

She did not know that Donald wrote to her far more often than he did to Connie. At home Connie busied herself with a little flutter of revived interest in war matters. She was on numerous committees and always appeared at the head of lists of patrons for this or that money-making scheme of various philanthropic bodies. But the steady work of preparing surgical dressings, of directing the actual working activities of the great organisations in the little community in which they lived fell upon Marian. She was busy early and late, devoting herself unceasingly to the tasks she had undertaken. Aunt Julia complained that she never saw her any more.

Yet, though she worked hard and kept herself constantly occupied, her mind was often far away, wandering with Mark and Donald along the white French roads. When the letters came it was a day of rejoicing, a holiday, especially when she saw that the envelope bore Donald's long, irregular script; then her heart leapt.

Not that his brief notes were ever remarkably personal in tone. They told her little of himself or of his mental reaction to the serious side of war. Only once did he make any but the most casual reference to Connie. It was not long after the letter in which he spoke of little Dick.

"Do you know, I've never cared for anything very much [he wrote], although I thought I did for Connie—once. It's been my trouble, that indifference. I never could care enough, never feel a really vital passion. I feel

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it for the moment, but it never stays. I used to think that a virtue—one should always be able to see all sides of a question. But I wonder, now, if that's not a mistake, if people don't get more out of life when they feel strongly on this or that subject. Doubtless they suffer more, but perhaps they also enjoy more. However, I've no kick coming on that score! No one could ever enjoy life more than I have and do."

And in his next letter:

"They say our show is due next week. Hope so, I'm sure. We've been waiting long enough. We're all eager and on our toes with excitement. So long! Wish me luck and remember about little Dick. Give him a kiss from me."

There followed a long silence.

Connie went about her ordinary routine of life, gay and smiling, running in to Thornton to parties, dashing here and there on this or that important mission. She joined the motor corps and bought herself a most fetching uniform; and although she always took the chauffeur along to drive for her, the costume was becoming and an immense success. People said of her, "How wonderfully young Mrs. Callender keeps up in spite of the anxiety. Such a good sport!"

Marian passed her one day when Connie was on her way to Thornton for a tea dance at Maisie Littell's (the proceeds were to go to a local war charity). Connie was dressed in her latest and most expensive frock. She stopped the car for a moment to call to Marian:

"Aren't you coming to Maisie's tea dance? No? Why, where's your patriotism? Tea dances are expected to win the war, you know!"

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Marian smiled and shook her head. "I couldn't go to-day. Too many other things."

"Ah! but you should! I'm afraid you're a slacker, my dear!"

She laughed, waved her hand and was gone.

Marian went home. She went to her own little room over the garden and read again Donald's last letter from the front. Those fateful words, "They say our show is due next week," seemed to stare at her from the page.

She walked over to the window and stood looking out. The garden lay serene in the sunlight. It was all so peaceful and quiet and over there—

She dropped to her knees by the window, covering her face with her hands. While Connie was dancing, Marian was praying for Donald's safety, praying earnestly, blindly, unknowing that at that moment, while the troops swept triumphantly over St. Quentin, he was lying in a broken trench, dead, with a bullet through his breast.

For once the God who looked after him slept.

3

It was Mrs. Jerrold of the hotel who told Marian the news, running out from the house with her apron wound about her arms.

"Excuse my appearance," she said. "I'm just getting the baking in; I'm all over flour. But I see you passing through the kitchen window and I thought I just must run out and learn if Miss Pritchard's got the news yet. It's awful, ain't it? A pity—"

Marian nodded, turned from her and fled towards the cottage.

As she walked up the drive Aunt Julia rose from her chair by the window.

"What is it, child?"

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But Marian passed her in silence, going up the stairs, not rapidly but slowly, as if her limbs were weighted. She went into her own room, closed the door and locked it.

Aunt Julia hesitated a moment. Then being a wise woman she went back to her place. After a while she went out and strolled in the garden.

4

All Whitridge had the news before very long—the other, that still greater news that followed the first stunning announcement of Donald Callender's death, and thrilled the little place with the sense of unaccustomed importance. All Whitridge heard and discussed it and marvelled. Donald's colonel had written and Mark's major. Gradually the whole story permeated the little village. The Reverend Paul went among his parishioners, severe, unbending as ever; but in his heart there burned a fierce, exultant pride, stern, unspoken; and Cynthia Wetherell grew radiant and strong with happiness, the years seemed to drop away from her like a second blooming of youth.

To Marian the months brought a never ceasing vision, like a nightmare that had to be lived out. Night after night when the lights were out in the cottage and darkness lay like a cloak over sea and dune and land, when the winter winds tore through the front garden and when the first spring flowers shed their perfume abroad, she lived through it again.

Whitridge and its familiar sights and sounds faded. The long Thornton road became instead a cluttered, mired way crowded with soldiers. Instead of the peaceful meadows round about, Marian saw the bleak fields of Flanders, torn and desolate, with the shells flying over.

Daylight, misty and wan. The tense waiting. The

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moments of suspense. Sudden silence of the roaring guns and the quick, eager rush over the top. Donald going ahead of his men, jaunty, debonair in the midst of the fury.

The guns again like the crash of many thunders. The shrill scream of shells whining overhead. Guns that speak from the opposite trenches. Death! Dismay! Confusion; and the order to retreat.

The sun high in the heavens now—a hot sun, cruel, on an upturned face—

Night. A night like a carnival of stars. A still night, unnaturally quiet. A hidden moon, lustreless, swathed in a veil of purple midst. Night, dark in spite of the misty heavens; lighted only with the occasional flare of the star shells. Night, vaguely, mystically beautiful, mercifully hiding the scars of the day.

Low murmurs in the tumbled and broken trenches; eager offers; protests; then a close-wrapped figure climbing silently over the parapet—

Mark, for it is Mark, creeping out, creeping out; lying flat at a sudden alarm; pistol in hand, creeping on, creeping on, only a moving shadow in the shadowy darkness. Mark pausing; stooping; searching—a muttered groan—

Mark returning; a bigger shadow this time, part of it limp and motionless. A heavy weight which he shifts as tenderly as possible to ease the pain. A shadow that moans again before the slow journey is over.

The goal at last; the first line of trenches. Eager hands stretched out to help. And at last, Donald Callender, lying, white and broken, but smiling in spite of the pain. White lips that gasp, "Good work, Mark!" before the eyes close again. . . .

Deft surgeons bending over the still form in the sheltered glare of the hospital dugout. The slow shaking of

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heads. Donald's laugh—he could still laugh even then. The call for Mark, and Mark bending over, tense, waiting for the slow, laboured words:

“You're a good sort, Mark—the best in the world. Marian ought to know. Tell her I understand now—I'm sorry—”

Night; and the stillness of night settling over the trenches. Night, cold, remote, passionless. Faint streaks of dawn; and the vigil ended—

Mark himself had written her those last words of Donald's. “I happened to be with him when he died,” he wrote her modestly. Did he guess how much those few, broken words meant to her? It was resignation and peace—a strange, inexplicable peace. And she would have been less than woman had she not acknowledged a thrill of triumph in the thought that, at the last, it was of herself and not of Connie that Donald had thought and spoken. He had rewarded her at last for that eager, generous love which youth offers with open, outstretched hands—he had left her peace and a memory untouched with bitterness.

CHAPTER XX

I

CONNIE had made the interesting discovery that black was becoming to her. At first she had hated the idea of donning it, and had written a hasty note to her mother consulting her as to the advisability of omitting the custom. Mrs. Leveredge replied with equal celerity counseling immediate conformity with the established modes. Mourning, she explained, need never be morose or morbid looking; it could, indeed, on the right type of person be extremely *dégagé*. Made and kept in proper style it often lent an added note of interest to a woman's appearance. She need not, of course, point out to her dear Connie the extreme fitness and propriety of such garments for a widow—particularly a young and attractive widow, and the protection that they afforded to one so situated.

Connie, who had half prepared a fictitious remembered conversation of Donald's in which he had mentioned that he never wanted to see her in black, abandoned the notion on receipt of her mother's letter and obediently followed the older woman's suggestions. Her virtue had its own reward in the perfectly astonishing becomingness of the aforementioned mourning garments. Every one agreed that black was of all colors the best suited to her beauty, setting off her charming form and rare colouring to perfection. Connie herself was delighted with the result.

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From the above-mentioned details it is not to be inferred that Connie did not suffer an extraordinary grief at Donald's death, or that the loss of her husband did not at once plunge her into a depth of despair from which it seemed for a time impossible for her to rise. It did; Connie was passionate in her emotions; after the first shock was over she became immersed in a melancholy almost unbearable—a deep and violent self-pity. Her grief was intense, knew no bounds. Over and over she complained that she hadn't wanted him to go! What were they thinking of to kill her husband, *her* husband! She was the most miserable of women! Whose sorrow was equal to hers?

But gradually, as the force of her emotions spent itself, as the first flush of her grief died away, she brightened. Every one was marvellously kind to her; she was, of course, more or less of a heroine in local eyes. No woman, young and pretty as she, could be placed in this romantic position without awakening a thrill of interest in the minds of those about her. The result was flattering. There could be nothing more agreeable to Connie than to be an object of interest; her egotism satisfied itself; her vanity approved. There is no doubt that her grief was real while it lasted, but her grief was for herself, not for Donald, and therefore curable.

Not so in the case of another member of the family. One day a few weeks after the news of Donald's death, old Colonel Callender appeared unexpectedly at the Hall.

He found Connie just going out. He greeted her with a considerate tenderness. She returned his advances with an odd pretext of affection. After all, they must stand by each other, she said. She was full of soft and delicate assurances, but was so very sorry that matters in Thornton needing her attention must call her away.

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But she was sure the dear Colonel would understand. Donald would have wanted her to keep up. She smiled pathetically into the old, weary eyes. He hastened to reassure and encourage her.

She had, in truth, not meant to go out so early, but she had seen him arriving from an upper window, and had hastily donned hat and gloves in which to greet him, lest she should be delayed. But of this the Colonel guessed nothing. When he assured her that he would get along all right, she replied rather vaguely, that she didn't know whether any one was in. The maids, however, if they were there, would get him anything he required.

Old Colonel Callender disclaimed the need for services of any sort. He had just wanted, he said, to look over a few old things in the attic. It wasn't at all necessary for any one to look after him. Connie must go on just as if he were not there. He might very probably be gone again before she got back. It was really only on a whim that he had run down. There must be no fuss made. If he were to disarrange her plans in any way it would be the greatest pity—so little had his visit been preconsidered.

Connie gave him a half smile intended to be delicately pathetic, and left him. The old man looked after her dainty, black-clad figure and sighed. Poor little girl! Poor little girl! To be left a widow so young! And so game about it, too! What was that she had said? That Donald would have wanted her to keep up. She was right about that. Donald would have wanted them all to keep up for his sake. That was Donald's way. Always cheery! Always game! A true gentleman!

With a hand that strove bravely to still the trembling lips the old man turned and walked slowly back along the hall and up the stairs. At the top of the stairs a desire came to him to look into his own old room; but

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it was Connie's now and the door was shut. He passed on with a sigh to the back of the house.

In spite of his sympathy for her, he was glad that Connie had gone and left him alone like this—alone to pursue those fleeting fancies, the memory of which had brought him back here. He must be alone; he wanted to be alone. Yet was he?

Not quite alone, for as he climbed the steep, narrow stairs of the attic, a little figure kept pace beside him, a little slender hand in his and small feet that made no sound on the creaking old stairs. It followed him over to the pile of trunks and boxes in the northwest corner, and looked with the old man out through the blurred pane at the farthest window; yet it said no word, was not even visible to human sight. Only the old man knew.

Colonel Callender gazed long at the thin line of light in the western sky before he turned back to the boxes and the old trunks. Then he began to pull them about with vague, ineffectual hands, dragging this one forward, shoving that one back, opening and closing the lids restlessly, glancing at the contents as if he were searching for something—something—what? He shook his old head thoughtfully. Impossible to say.

Yet he continued the search. He commenced pulling out the contents of some of the boxes, stray bits of clothing, toys and thumbed and worn books, relics of bygone days, mementoes of the boy he had loved. He pulled them out, one by one, turning them over in his old hands that shook in spite of himself. Donald would have wanted him to be game!

There was a kite—quite new— It had apparently never been used, but laid away carefully. And suddenly he remembered the day he had brought it home for the boy. The whole scene came back to him—the boy's delight

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tempered with a discreet reserve—Don was always a sober little fellow!

They had meant to go out and fly the kite that afternoon but something had interfered. What was it? Oh, yes, his mother had wanted Donald to drive with her, had insisted upon carrying the boy off on some stupid expedition or other. It had been a perfect day for flying a kite—good strong wind, everything right; and they had had to let it all go by the board. A shame!

And how well he remembered it all—even Donald's good-natured, "Never mind, Dad! We'll do it another day." Don was always good-natured—a sweet disposition. He hadn't appeared to mind. It was the Colonel himself who was disappointed. Sorry for the boy, sorry for himself. Perhaps, after all, it was he who cared the more. He had been left standing on the doorstep with the useless kite in his hands. It was the boy he had thought himself sorry for; but perhaps Don had understood better than he, when he said, "Never mind, Dad! Another day."

But for some reason there had never been another day—the kite had never been flown. It had gradually found its way into some closet and eventually been relegated to the attic. It was here now before him, lying, still fairly crisp and new, in the old man's hands.

And suddenly it seemed as if all his bitter grief collected itself and centred in the memory of that one lost day of pleasure years ago. It stuck and persisted in his mind, one vast regret that would not be comforted, a never ceasing, never to be satisfied wrong.

He passed his trembling old hands over the smooth, slender blades of the kite. His eyes, hot and dry, searching the empty garret, filled suddenly, and the paper sides of the kite blistered under his starting tears. He leaned

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forward stretching out his arms over the flimsy toy; but only the shadowy presence of that little, unseen figure heard the words that struggled from his lips—the deep, heart-wrung cry of generations of the bereaved:

“Oh, my son, Absalom! Oh, Absalom, my son, my son!”

2

The old man raised himself up feebly. He seemed much older, an old, old man; for grief will age a man far more than years. He rose and made a pathetic attempt to straighten his shoulders. Don would want him to keep up!

He moved; and as he did so his eyes fell on a packet of letters that had fallen to the floor, an old packet tied loosely about with a faded string.

The old man stooped and picked it up, shoving the bulging papers together with his trembling hands. He glanced at them absently—mostly old bills and receipts, one or two noted and labelled in Clara Callender's neat, fine script. The old man fumbled with the package, trying to look at one more closely written over than the rest. A paper loosened itself from the bunch; slipped from between his fingers and fluttered to the floor.

The Colonel stooped again. As he raised it he saw that it was part of an old letter; the handwriting was Donald's.

“Don! Don!” he breathed; and the paper shook as he read it.

He read it over twice, slowly. It was only a half sheet torn off, unfinished, evidently a first draft of a letter or an unsatisfactory copy that he had thrown aside to start afresh.

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Colonel Callender went back and read it again. He turned it over and looked at it carefully. No date; but the fact that it had slipped in with these bills, by accident surely, placed it sufficiently accurately—the last year of Clara's life.

It was short. Only a few sentences written hurriedly without beginning or end.

“I have a feeling that Marian at least ought to know it was you, Mark, who got Prince out of that burning barn and not me. God knows I'm no hero! Doesn't matter about the others—my Dad's proud of me, but he'd feel the same way—but it might make a difference with Marian—about you, I mean—”

The rather boyish writing broke off abruptly.

The Colonel sat thinking. The scene came back to him. So it hadn't been Donald who saved his horse that time. Well, well, that was a long time ago. How proud he had been of Don! The boys were brave, both of them. But Don was right about his feeling the same way. He shouldn't have taken the credit that belonged to another man. And Mark, too! Mark who had risked his life to save him over there in France! The old man's eyes became suffused with tears. Ah, there was a brave lad! What did Donald mean by, “it might make a difference with Marian?” He wrinkled his brows.

Some inner conviction made him fold the letter carefully away in his wallet. Mark and Don had been comrades always; Mark had tried to save his boy. He must do his best for Mark. He did not understand; blind impulse and the feeling that he was obeying Don's wishes led him straight from the attic to Marian's cottage.

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It made him happy feeling he was doing something noble in Don's name. The little leaves rustling overhead told him he was right; a sense of Don, close at hand, encouraging him, comforted him; the world grew suddenly bright with a sense of duty done; the old man was happy.

CHAPTER XXI

I

THE long road from Thornton to Whitridge stretched white and gleaming under the spring-tide sun when Mark Wetherell came home from the war. There was no beating of drums nor blaring of trumpets to greet him when he arrived. Whitridge welcomed her returning sons calmly, dispassionately, even this one who wore beneath his coat the highest medal in the gift of the country. They had done their duty; what man could do less? The word "hero" was never spoken; least of all would Mark have liked it if it had been.

He came back to the village and the townspeople and the friends of his youth the same simple, unaffected, unassuming Mark, and slipped unostentatiously back into his old place in Judge Phillips's office. There was the usual nuisance of newspaper interviews and being invited to sit on platforms at public meetings, but these things Mark evaded with a sagacity and slyness surely lately acquired. And interest in one who systematically refuses to feel himself interesting soon dies out. People ceased to speak of his exploit. Only those nearly concerned remembered.

2

On a day that was tremulous with the ripening breath of summer, Marian hitched Nance to the old buggy and drove in to Thornton. She left Aunt Julia making pre-

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serves in the cottage kitchen; there were some glass jars needed—that made an excuse for her journey.

The drive to town was uneventful. Scrupulously honest she bought the jars first; then drove the mare down Elm Street and drew up before the door of Judge Phillips's office. It was a quaint, old-fashioned, rambling, wooden building much in need of paint, was indeed one of the oldest in town, situated in a quiet by-street running off from one of the business thoroughfares.

Marian got out of the buggy and tied Nance to the old-fashioned iron horse post before the door. With a little catch in her throat she walked up the steps and opened the door.

Mark was sitting in the outer office as she entered. He rose and came eagerly forward, holding out his hands in welcome. When he came towards her like this his face lit up, rather as if some one had lighted a candle within.

Marian saw; and felt the rose deepen on her cheek.

Mark was holding open the door of the inner office for her.

“Judge Phillips is away. Let's go in here; we can talk better. This is indeed an honour. Do you know, I was feeling very dull and just wishing something exciting like this would happen. Did you ever do that as a child? Close your eyes and think perhaps when you opened them you'd see—whatever it was you desired to see? I did it to-day. I was thinking of you and I closed my eyes for an instant. I opened them and here you are. And yet there are people in the world who won't believe in miracles—but they're the fools and the losers!”

Marian smiled. “Mark, will you ever grow up?” She stepped through the doorway into the inner office and took the chair he pulled forward for her.

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"What a big hat," he said. "Won't you take it off? Let me take it."

She had on a wide-brimmed shade hat which drooped over her left cheek and cast a deep shadow over her grey eyes. While he stood waiting she did, as he had suggested, take it off, and laid it on the table beside her. He noticed that after she had done so she did not put her hands up to smooth her hair or fuss self-consciously with her appearance as most girls would have done. She took the hat off and it was off and that was the end. That was part of her charm—she did everything so simply.

Yet she was not quite calm. There was a hesitant diffidence, a faint nervousness in her manner; and her cheeks were unusually flushed. Mark leaned towards her from the Judge's big armchair.

"Tell me, is something troubling you? Are you worried about anything? Can I be of use?"

Marian hesitated, glancing a trifle nervously around the office. She had been here before at the time of her mother's death, when Mark and the grave, courteous old man whose place he was now occupying had put her affairs in order for her, but not recently. In a flutter of memory she saw the walls lined with fat legal volumes in their calfskin bindings, and sniffed the intangible odour of old leather and parchment. That time seemed very long ago to her now.

A big willow tree in the back yard, heavy with summer foliage, drooped over the rear window like a green waterfall. She noticed the patterns its dancing leaves made on the grey wall opposite above the bookcases.

She looked last at Mark himself. There was something old-fashioned about him, too, seen in these surroundings, something in keeping with the room in which they sat—an air of old-world courtesy and chivalric reverence for

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women, something gentle and restrained. She could not help thinking of that as she met his clear, blue eyes with their steady smile as he leaned towards her.

She took a paper from her dress and held it between her fingers.

"Mark, I came to you because—" She stopped and slipped the paper into his hand—the old letter Colonel Callender had brought her.

He turned it over in his hands a moment, then began reading it, slowly, thoughtfully. She watched his face as he read.

She saw that he had finished long before he looked up and met her eyes. She spoke first:

"So it was you all the time and not Donald who saved Prince. And yet you never told—not even me!"

"Of course not, Marian."

"But if you knew how I revered him for that—what a hero he was in my eyes— And all the time it was you— Oh, Mark, why didn't I guess?"

He folded the letter and held it out to her.

"Do you want this?"

She shook her head; and he rose and walked over to the table. Very deliberately he lighted a candle and watched the old, brittle paper crackle to ashes. When it was gone he came over and took her hands in both of his.

"We won't think of that again. Neither you nor I have ever doubted Donald's courage."

"But I'm glad I know at last."

"It matters so little now."

"Yes—now!" She, too, had risen and stood looking at him, a half-wistful smile upon her lips. "But I am afraid we neither of us, Don nor I, appreciated you in the old days. I am sure I didn't. Always I have undervalued you!"

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He smiled and shook his head. "No, no," he said.

"But I was unjust and stupid! I was blind to so much that was good!"

"No, no, I will not have you say such things."

"Ah, but I must say them—and more. Mark, tell me truthfully, do you care for me—still?"

"You know that, Marian."

She hesitated, and again the rosy colour flooded her cheeks.

"Mark, do you remember what you said when you went away, when I last talked with you like this—that you would never—never tell me that again unless I asked you to? Mark, I came here to-day—to ask you—" But the words were too difficult to say. They were facing each other, both standing; and the willow tree outside the window waved its mocking shadows over their faces and over the wall behind them. They were so still the very rustle of its leaves could be heard through the glass; the ticking of a clock on the bookcase sounded abnormally loud.

Mark spoke at last, hesitantly: "Is it because of this letter? Is it because you no longer love Donald, Marian?"

She met his eyes without constraint, and shook her head.

"I shall always love him. I could not change that unless I changed myself. There is a verse in the Bible that says, 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.' That is the way I feel about Donald; the way I shall always feel. Mark, surely you are too noble and good to wish that to be different."

He looked at her with love in his eyes. "Your loyalty is the most beautiful thing about you!" He paused. "Then it is for that other, for the thing I did for him—in France?"

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"I—I don't know." She looked up, her grey eyes clouded.

"For that was for you, too, Marian. I could not have looked you in the face if I had not gone out there after him. And then, when it was all so useless, when I failed—ah, you don't know how I resent that failure, Marian!"

"I know," she whispered. "Oh, Mark, I do care for you for that."

He turned from her with a little sigh and dropped her hands which he had taken in his.

"Ah, my dear, did you think I would take you like that, claim you as a reward for what I had done!"

"Mark, Mark!" she cried.

He spoke resolutely, sternly. "I want only the best. There was a time when I wanted you desperately, blindly—at any price. It was a selfish love, a thoughtless love. I know now that I was wrong. You have taught me a lesson in faithfulness to one's ideals. You've always been so earnest, so sincere, so like a rock in your steadfastness. You've no idea how wonderful you are. You keep the same ideals you always had, all the paraphernalia of the soul that the rest of us have either lost or discarded as useless in a workaday world."

She spoke slowly. "After all, because life is unsatisfactory is that any reason why one should give up one's ideals?"

"Ah, that is it," he said. "I would not let you imperil yours by coming to me."

Marian spoke softly. "Then—then you don't want to marry me now?"

He shook his head. "No, dear."

She looked down quietly, not shamefacedly. "You know, I came here to-day to tell you I would."

"I know. And I am grateful. Oh, Marian dear, you

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know it is not that I don't love you! You know that! I do—more than ever. So much that I would not take this charity at your hands. For it is charity, however much we disguise it.”

She looked up. There were tears in her eyes.

She spoke. “You know what you are doing? I—I can't ever ask you again.”

“I know,” he said with downcast eyes.

She picked up the big hat from the table and put it on. He watched the soft shadow of its brim fall again over her face. It was like a shadow falling over his heart.

“Good-bye, Mark!”

“Good-bye, Marian!”

He went forward and opened the door of the inner office for her, then stood aside and watched her go slowly through the outer office, out through the open door and down the steps. He watched her until she had untied Nance and climbed into the buggy; watched until the last moment, until she had passed out of sight. And the light of Mark's world went out with her.

CHAPTER XXII

ON a vivid, blustering morning in September, Marian walked down the shore road towards the flat reaches of Hodder's Beach with the same brisk step as of old. Although there were things needing to be done at the cottage, some inner restlessness had driven her forth to seek the calm and solitude of the sandy wastes below the church. Here for years she had brought her joys and sorrows; the sea and the headland and the long, grey stretches of sandy shore were hers; they would understand and soothe her mood; she had known these things all her life.

She came to the beach and saw the sands stretching endlessly away, white and cool, the sea gulls flapping overhead, the long line of breakers down towards the headland, the hunched backs of the dunes and the flashing white Casino.

It was a day of uncertain promise; a day of shifting sun and shadow. The great clouds raced across the blue, driven by invisible winds, their dark shadows patterned on the grey sands below as they hurried by. The wavelets broke far out, line after line, gentle, untroubled, calm, sliding back with a soft, singing sound.

She turned, walking northward towards the white Casino far up the beach. It made her think of Mark—the day he had dared her to climb inside one of the broken, shutterless windows of the lower floor. As vividly as if it had been yesterday she recalled the dank, mouldy interior with its cobwebby beams, flecked and scarred with scabi-

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ous incrustations from the damp, salt winds; the heap of broken chairs and benches grouped in the centre of the building; the hollow sound the waves made as they rushed up the beach without; the creaking and groaning of the wind—

And then Mark had tried to tease her. He had run away and pretended to leave her there alone. The sudden terror of the bleak, lonely place came back to her now. Ah! how frightened she had been! She had run after him, blindly, through the dark hall, calling his name.

And at the sound of her voice he had turned compassionately to wait for her. "I'm here, Marian," he said, "right here!" And then the comforting clasp of his fingers as they scampered together into the clear light of out-of-doors. "I was there all the time. I'll always be there," Mark had said, when she begged him not to frighten her again like that.

The memory of those words brought a sudden sob into her throat; a little ache of homesickness overcame her. That was all so long ago. She thought of all that had happened to her since those old days. Ah! what a thing life was! What a shifting, changing, kaleidoscopic thing! In childhood how little one guessed all that lay before one! How strange and difficult the path!

Mark had praised her ideals the last time they had talked together. But did she really deserve that praise?

Mark was away; had been gone all summer, since very soon after that last conversation in Judge Phillips's office. Occasionally she reproached herself with being responsible for his banishment. But she could not question his decision in regard to herself. He had been right, absolutely right—fiercely she told herself over and over again. It was her own fault, of that she was certain. All her

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life she had taken Mark and Mark's devotion as a matter of course. Small wonder that at the last Mark's stern virtue must refuse her belated penitence.

It did not ever occur to her to doubt his love for her. To doubt that would be to doubt her hopes of heaven itself. But if he guessed, if he knew, would he come back?

For now at last she saw the past and the present very clear before her, spread out like a chart with every changing emotion indicated upon it. Her love for Donald she regarded without prejudice or self-deception, a deep love, a real love, the great love of her life, the eager, passionate love which youth offers once and only once. She had spoken the truth when she told Mark that nothing could alter that love.

But now it was a memory, a distant, beautiful memory. Death had mercifully put to sleep the old longings. The gusts of passion which the springtide of life had awakened were gone; the hopes, the dreams, the lovely imaginings were hers no longer.

It was not that she had forgotten. In her heart she bore the burden of her unappeased love, all the sweet revelation of joys that she had missed, the years that disappointed; she saw life not the thing she had planned it, not a rhapsody of birds' songs and the pearly mists of waking dawns, not the "singing and the golden"; yet the long procession of the years had left her something finer than those first passionate desires, a deeper nobility, a keener understanding. Her soul was a garden walled about with her own white thoughts, a place where memory's feet might linger without reproach. From all else Donald's words—those last whispered words of his—had set her free.

But that was what Mark could not understand—how

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that love of hers was now a thing of the past, the dear, dead past. She had not known it herself until Mark went away. And now it was too late to tell him!

She had wandered a long way towards the upper end of the beach, walking with her eyes cast down, close to the water's edge where the hard sand, still wet, cracked and rayed and blanched as if with sudden fear beneath each footstep. But she was not thinking of the sand or the sea birds wheeling above her head or of the soft voice of the ocean.

A big wave, larger than the rest, broke with a muffled roar. The water rippled; spread widely; ran well up the beach. With a start, Marian caught her skirts about her and ran quickly back out of reach. The sudden action interrupted her thoughts, made her look up.

A man was standing a short distance from her, his figure outlined against the blue-white sky. She had not observed his approach. She stared an instant. Now with a surprise that left her almost dizzy, she recognised him and ran forward with a joyful cry:

"Mark! Mark!"

He came forward swiftly to meet her with outstretched hands over the flat, white sands.

"Mark! Mark!" she cried again. And there was that in her voice that made Mark's heart leap and his nerves quiver with a new, strange joy.

They stood close together, staring at each other in sudden understanding. And then, without quite knowing how it happened, he had her in his arms and was kissing the tender, yielding lips, those long desired lips that now met his for the first time.

She leaned back in his arms looking up into his face. "Mark, how did you know?"

He smiled into the grey, upraised eyes. "I have loved

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too long and too well not to know the look of love when it is there."

"Oh, my dear! Always I have loved you but not this way before. Can you forgive me this long delay? I have been so unhappy; I think I grew afraid of love. I am almost afraid now. It doesn't seem right for me to be so happy."

"My poor darling! You shall always be happy now. For you do care for me now, Marian—you are sure?"

"Oh, my dear, yes! You are so strong, so sure—so—so safe! I feel such perfect trust—"

"And love, dear?"

She met his eyes without constraint or reservation.

"And love," she said.

"Oh, my darling, my darling! After all these years!"

They turned together and walked back along the sands, slowly, absently, towards the rocky headland which St. Peter's crowns; stopping occasionally to gaze out over the blue-grey water, their eyes following the flight of passing sea birds, their hearts speaking as well as their tongues.

"When did you guess, Mark? What made you know and come back to me?" she asked him once.

He paused a moment before he replied. "I don't know exactly. I can't explain. It was as if something just led me here. For several days I've been thinking of you and feeling that I ought to come back—that I'd been a coward to run away as I did—for I did run away from you, Marian. I didn't know whether it was because I had truly given up all hope—that seemed unbearable—or because I was afraid if I stayed I might find the temptation too strong for me—the temptation to go to you and retract what I had said, to beg you to offer me another chance. And then, yesterday, all at once, I just knew I had to come—I couldn't explain it—I just knew."

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"You were cruel," she said, "to send me away the way you did."

"Was I, dear? If I hadn't, if I had accepted your sacrifice, would you ever have come to love me truly as you do now? Would you ever have really cared?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, dear. Perhaps the idea that I couldn't have you after all made me want you; let me see my own need of you. It may have made me humble."

"Don't say that, dear!"

"Oh, but you were right. I ought to be punished—" He stopped her with a kiss.

They had turned back onto the road, cutting across the salt marshes, following it up over the hill whence the village could be seen lying cozily in its little hollow. At the top of the hill a shower overtook them. They had seen it coming back on the sands, but in their absorption had given no heed. Mark was optimistic.

"It may pass over; it's heading south."

But it was coming faster than they thought. The rain came down just as they reached the peak of the little rise—a sudden dash of big drops punctuated by gusty shakings of the thick-leaved trees on either hand.

"Come closer to me," he commanded, "and take my arm."

"Oh, it's only a shower—it won't last."

They drew aside from the road, standing in the lee of the thick bushes that lined the roadside. They were just at the pitch of the hill; the road and the country surrounding lay below them, the outlines blurred by the falling rain as if an awkward finger had smudged them out. A misty veil, like a curtain, hung all around them. There on the summit of the hill they seemed to be alone, cut off from all the world.

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Marian was standing very close to Mark. It gave her a peculiar thrill, this nearness—a happy, comforting thrill, a feeling of security and strength. She sighed, glancing out at the falling drops.

“How beautiful it is! Oh, Mark, I am happy!”

Suddenly the grey clouds above them parted; one little wispy streak of sunlight filtered through, widened, grew big; the wet leaves about them glistened delicately; a bird chirped from a near-by thicket.

From the circling protection of Mark’s arm Marian pointed back the way they had come.

“Look, Mark, a rainbow!”

It hung in the sky above them a misty, tremulous arc of purest colour, arching down to earth, dazzling, evanescent, of an impalpable beauty—like a divine omen—a sign of God’s grace.

Marian looked up into Mark’s face.

“Oh, Mark, I believe I’ve really found it at last!”

“What, dear?”

“The thing we all search for, the golden happiness, the treasure hidden at the foot of the rainbow!”

“I found it long ago,” he said. “Oh, my love! my love!”

(1)

THE END

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